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**HOW DOES SAUDI ARABIA USE SPORTSWASHING TO BUILD SOFT POWER
AND RESHAPE ITS INTERNATIONAL IMAGE**

Master's Thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Saudi Arabia strategically uses sportswashing as a soft power tool to rebrand its international image and divert attention from domestic issues, such as a bad human rights record or corruption. Situated within the frameworks of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding, the research applied a qualitative single case study approach focused on Saudi Arabia. Empirical analysis was conducted across five key domains of sportswashing: hosting of mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities, sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing in international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights, and engaging and using well-renowned athletes. Drawing on primary state documents and statements, academic literature, media reports, and NGO publications, the thesis finds that Saudi Arabia's efforts have resulted in mixed results. While the kingdom has successfully increased its global visibility and partial credibility, these efforts have also intensified criticism, creating a paradox of fragile legitimacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the 2. December 2010, the now convicted FIFA president Sepp Blatter announced that the 2022 World Cup would be hosted by Qatar. This announcement came as a huge shock not only for other countries that wanted to host the World Cup but for the whole world and the global sporting community. After this announcement, the general public and academia started to research the relationship between sports and politics. Although the relationship between sports and politics has never been admitted, and sport has always been deemed apolitical, this is simply not true. Sport has always been, is, and will have a significant relationship with politics. “From the Roman Colosseum to the Yankee Stadium, the Olympics to the Super Bowl, sports have always played a central role in societies. With so much at stake—money, pride, power (and occasionally even fun)—sports are undeniably political.” (Gift & Miner, 2017, p.127)

The new term that arose from this latest research is sportswashing. Sportswashing is the deliberate use of sports, sport mega-events, teams, or athletes in order to better the image of the country on the international stage and to divert attention from human rights violations or political repression that is mainly used by authoritarian regimes. After Russia attacked Ukraine on 24. February 2022, the international community showcased the powerful connection between sports and politics. In the span of just a few days, Russian and Belarusian athletes have been banned from competing in various sports and competitions. One of the most significant bans has been made by the IOC (International Olympic Committee), IIHF (International Ice Hockey Federation), and FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association). These bans are also active in 2025 and are unlikely to be lifted until Russia ends its war in Ukraine. These developments highlight the undeniable connection between sports and politics. As Dubinsky (2023, p.25) argues, “every kind of political regime has been using sports to achieve social, political, and economic goals,” emphasizing the longstanding connection between sports and politics. More recently, this connection has been used by states that have trouble with their reputation, such as Qatar or Saudi Arabia. These countries seek to use sports in order to gain soft power and do not care about their athletic achievements.

Despite the increasing academic and media attention, there is a missing theoretical understanding of how exactly these states are using sportswashing to gain soft power or influence. And while literature on soft power, nation branding, and sportswashing is growing,

the connection remains fragmented. Most of the existing literature focuses on single case studies of countries or sports events. There is a research gap in comparative work that would explain exactly how authoritarian regimes are using and implementing sportswashing. This thesis takes up this research gap by analyzing Saudi Arabia's sportswashing practices and situating them within the broader soft power strategies of public diplomacy and nation branding.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how Saudi Arabia is strategically using sportswashing in order to build soft power and reshape its international image. In order to do that, it will answer the research question: *How does Saudi Arabia use sportswashing to build soft power and reshape its international image?*

Based on the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding, this thesis expects to find out that sportswashing is used not only as a tool for reputation management but also as a long-term tool of image engineering by authoritarian regimes. The hypothesis is that Saudi Arabia's approach is combining the symbolic presentation with material investments in order to normalise its global reputation while avoiding political reform.

This study uses a qualitative single case study approach focused on Saudi Arabia. The data sources include primary documents, such as the Vision 2030 report or the announcements made by the Ministry of Sport or Tourism, academic literature, media reports, and NGO statements.

This thesis consists of three main chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical framework for understanding the use of sportswashing as a soft power strategy. It outlines the key concepts of sportswashing, soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding. The second chapter details the research design and methodology, explaining the choice of a qualitative single case study, the rationale behind the selection of Saudi Arabia as the case, and the approach to data selection and analysis using primary documents, academic literature, and media reports. Finally, the third chapter includes the empirical analysis that is divided into five thematic domains: hosting of mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities, sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing into international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights and finally, engaging and using well renowned athletes. These domains are then examined using the theoretical framework in the first chapter, and finally, a discussion of the findings, which critically evaluates how Saudi Arabia operationalizes sportswashing to build soft power and reshape its global image.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Understanding sportswashing - origins and definitions

After the announcement of the venue for the 2022 World Cup, a new term arose in academia. This term was sportswashing. The term sportswashing describes attempts by authoritarian governments to use athletics to repair their damaged international reputations. (Lenskyj,2020) The awarding of the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup to Qatar sparked a lot of ethical questions, chief among them being the country's appalling human rights record regarding migrant labor. (Fruh, Archer, & Wojtowicz, 2022)

Although the term was first used in 2015 and gained popularity in 2018 (Frommer, 2025), the practices of this term have been familiar for centuries. As Dubinsky (2023,p 157) states, sports have long been used for public diplomacy and nation branding, dating back to Alexander the Great's conquests as well as the city-states and Olympian athletic events of ancient Greece. One effective Hellenizing strategy was the introduction of sporting contests in recently conquered colonies.

Sports have been employed as a public diplomacy tool in more recent years (Søyland, 2020) or to demonstrate political ideology. (Murray, 2018, p.1). Hitler's Nazi regime took advantage of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games to showcase the Third Reich's power and enhance its reputation abroad. Similar to this, Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy used the 1934 FIFA World Cup to further his policies and instill a sense of patriotism in his nation's national team, which went on to win the competition. (Søyland, 2020,p.12) Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2022,p.103) adds that even though the term sportswashing is relatively new, it describes a phenomenon that may have roots in the 1934 World Cup, which Mussolini's fascist Italy hosted, the 1936 Olympics, which Hitler's Nazi Germany hosted, and even in the years in between, like the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, which took place just two years after a military coup established a cruel dictatorship there.

According to Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2022,p.102), sportswashing is derived from two similar terms, namely whitewashing and greenwashing.

The term whitewashing refers to the widespread practice of presenting something or someone in a positive light, even when they have specific questionable characteristics or marks against them that are covered up by the whitewash. Greenwashing is the practice of businesses exaggerating or constructing false environmental claims or the environmental attributes of

their goods in order to profit from consumers' pro-environmental sentiment. (Fruh, Archer, & Wojtowicz, 2022)

As stated by Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2022,p.103), whitewashing, greenwashing, and sportswashing all share a knowable moral violation on the one hand, and the desire to gain attention from that moral violation on the other hand. "In the case of sportswashing, the way attention is routed away from the moral violation is through sport. Because sport engages the passions of so many people and because sport commands a huge amount of attention, it has become a valuable strategic vehicle for navigating the fundamental dynamic between a moral violation and the desire for that violation not to be attended to by others." Grix (2023, p.4) supports this idea and adds that sport is used due to the reasons it is seen as clean or healthy.

As cited in Grix (2023, p.4) "Canniford and Hill (2022) point out that many fossil fuel and carbon intensive industries have moved on from greenwashing and into sportswashing as sport has positive impacts with which to wash off negative associations with problems such as environmental degradation and human rights abuses. Elite sport is often thought of as healthy, clean, and wholesome and something to be associated with, despite evidence to the contrary."

Despite the rise of the study of sportswashing, there is no consensus on the exact definition of the term or, more importantly, what sportswashing is or is not. Grix (2023, p.4) states that according to early adopters like the human rights group Amnesty International, sportswashing is a term that describes the use of sports to distract from unethical practices, and that incorporates both the states and companies.

According to Boykoff (2022, p.342), sportswashing is the practice of political leaders using sports to project legitimacy or importance on the international scene while igniting nationalism and diverting attention away from long-standing social issues and human rights concerns at home. Mega-events are used by sportswashers to promote national prestige and to signal political or economic progress. Both authoritarian and democratic political environments can give rise to sportswashing. Sportswashing can target a nation's internal population just as much as an external, global public; it is a social relationship that entangles multiple audiences, both domestic and international.

The terminology and the content of sportswashing have been evolving since it was first used. The phrase was first used to refer to the hosting of large-scale events, but it is currently also used to refer to ownership and sponsorship agreements. (Matras,2024,p.534)

Grix completes the aforementioned and adds his definition of sportswashing. As he states, (2023, p.2) "Although sportswashing lacks an agreed upon definition, it has nonetheless come to be a short-hand way of criticising (usually) non-democratic regimes or large corporations

for using investment in world-renowned athletes, sports clubs, and sports events to detract from illiberal, non-democratic, and/or exploitative practices in their home countries or businesses".

Collyer Merritt (2024) identifies five main ways in which sportswashing is executed, mostly in authoritarian regimes:

1. hosting major competitions such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics and Paralympics,
2. establishing new facilities, domestic leagues, and sports infrastructure,
3. sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated organizations, such as national airlines and tourism departments,
4. international league and team investments, typically made by sovereign wealth funds or appointing prominent international athletes to serve as ambassadors for new organizations and leagues
5. engaging well-known international sportspeople in ambassadorial roles for new leagues and bodies

While the mentioned practices demonstrate how sportswashing is or can be used in practice by various actors, it is equally important to understand the motivations that are driving states to engage in sportswashing strategies.

According to Miettinen (2024, p.19), the motivations behind sportswashing activities fall into two categories: reputation management and impression management. Impression management is typically employed to achieve short-term objectives and is connected to Nye's concept of soft power. On the other hand, reputation management is more about developing a long-term plan that focuses on enhancing the nation's image over time. Gaining power and enhancing the operator's reputation among the target audience are the two ideas' shared goals. Although managing one's reputation in the eyes of other countries is a priority for all countries, the methods used vary by country.

Grix (2023,p.6) conceptualizes sportswashing as those who have cultural power and prestige (at the "centre") and those who want it (from the "periphery") are involved; those who have these things also want power and financial resources in return. Figure 1 below depicts this relationship.

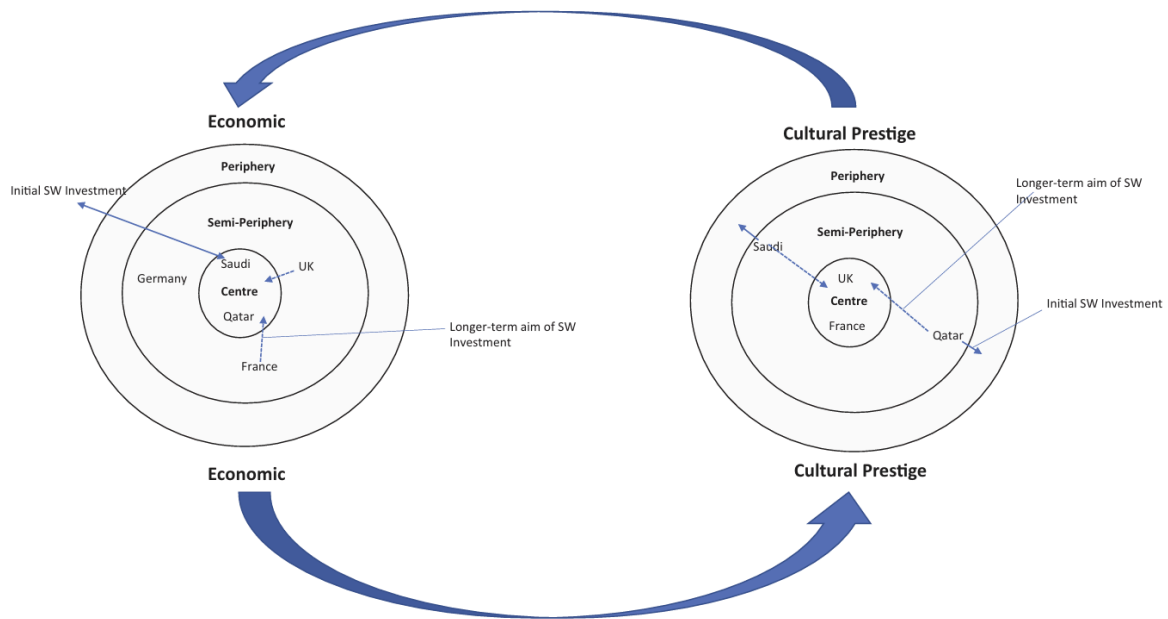


Figure 1 - Economic and Cultural Prestige (Grix,2023, p.7)

According to Grix (2023, p.8), there are three distinct waves to this strategy. The first wave involves capital-rich nations' initial investments in cultural prestige and power, which typically occur in the face of a deluge of negative media coverage that criticizes the arrangement. The second wave consists of a protracted period of negative narratives and counter-narratives regarding the cultural differences, incompatibility of values, and norms between the investor and those making the investment. (This time frame is shortened if there is a major sporting event, like the World Cup in Qatar.) The third wave symbolizes the last stage of the arrangement becoming "normalized," meaning that the criticism stops, media attention wanes, and the benefits of the injected financial capital start to materialize. A good example could be Manchester City, which has had multiple title-winning seasons. Grix (2023, p.8) argues that this is a component of the investors' long-term plan to shift from sportswashing to eventually gaining soft power through the mainstreaming aspects of sport. As a result, we see sportswashing as the start of a continuum that will eventually result in gains in soft power.

Boykoff (2022, p.345), in Figure 2, completes this with his description of target audiences that could be both international and domestic.



Figure 2 - Sportswashing audiences. (Boykoff,2025, p.345)

Sportswashing serves as the central concept of this thesis because it provides a focused lens through which this thesis will analyze how authoritarian regimes strategically use sports in order to manage and shape their perception at home and abroad. By focusing on sportswashing as the key concept, this thesis will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between sport, politics, and power projection in authoritarian regimes.

This thesis, however, also relies on the scholarship of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding. Together, these four concepts built a conceptual frame that I will use in order to analyze why authoritarian regimes strategically turn to sports and their use as a means of managing their international image. These theoretical approaches will provide a foundation for a better understanding of the broader use and logic of attraction, symbolism in communication, and reputation that helps to underpin the use of sports on the global stage. They help to understand how states seek to gain legitimacy not through traditional diplomacy or coercion, but also through the usage of prestige, visibility, and emotions.

While the literature and previous research done on soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding are well established and defined, there remains a notable gap in scholarship that would link these concepts to sportswashing and its usage by authoritarian regimes. While

existing literature on sportswashing is growing rapidly, it still lacks a common understanding and definition of why authoritarian regimes engage in this tactic. Most of the research in this field focuses on either individual case studies of mainly Qatar, Russia, or Belarus, but it is just an analysis. Nevertheless, there is minimal exploration and research of the unique political, economic, or cultural factors that are the main factors of sportswashing done by authoritarian regimes that choose sportswashing over alternative methods of soft power usage. However, while the term sportswashing captures the meaning, it does not fully explain the mechanisms through which these means are intended to succeed. To understand how sportswashing functions, it is necessary to connect it to broader theoretical frameworks. The following sections will introduce and examine soft power as the base for attraction, public diplomacy as the strategic communication process of this attraction, and nation branding as the structured management of state identity. Together, these three approaches form the conceptual foundation to analyze how and why regimes like Saudi Arabia invest in sport to rebrand and change their international image.

2.2 Soft Power

In his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, American political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. popularized the term soft power. In this article, he aims to demonstrate why the United States is the only superpower in the post-Cold War world. (Nye, 1990). The idea of Power is "the most important single idea in political theory" and "perhaps the most fundamental in the whole of political science. (Baldwin, 2016, p.1) Although the widespread agreement among scholars is that Power is important, there is not always as much consensus about how to define the term. (Baldwin, 2016, p.2) According to Barnett & Duvall (2005, p.41), the realist conception of Power is "the ability of states to use material resources to get others to do what they otherwise would not ". Figure 3 below describes the types of

Power according to Joseph Nye.

	Behaviors	Primary Currencies	Government Policies
Military Power	coercion deterrence protection	threats force	coercive diplomacy war alliance
Economic Power	inducement coercion	payments sanctions	aid bribes sanctions
Soft Power	attraction agenda setting	values culture policies institutions	public diplomacy bilateral and multilateral diplomacy

Figure 3- Types of power. Nye (2008,p.31)

“Everyone is familiar with hard power. We know that military and economic might often get others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements (“carrots”) or threats (“sticks”). (Nye, 2008, p.5)

Soft power was initially aimed at assisting US policymakers in comprehending the function and constraints of post-Cold War hegemony. The concept, nevertheless, is extensively used and broadly applicable. Naturally, the phenomenon existed before it was given a name. The fact is that all nation-states have used and still use soft power to varying degrees. (Nygård, 2013) It is only logical that in the increasingly globalised world with the rapid evolution of technology and communication, the states want to achieve as much power and influence as possible.

Nye contends that as a result of these developments, nations have to adapt to the latest challenges presented by the information era. Countries should seek power through attraction rather than solely using economic sanctions or military threats to force other nations to do things they otherwise would not. Nye refers to this as co-optive power or soft power. (Nygård, 2013) “ This soft power-getting others to want the outcomes that you want-co-opts

people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others.” (Nye, 2008, p.5)

A state can influence others in three different ways: 1) threats of coercion (sticks), inducements and payments (carrots), and finally through the power of attraction. (Nygård, 2013,p.5) Figure 4 below summarizes the differences between hard and soft power in terms of behaviours and resources, according to Nye.

	Hard	Soft
Spectrum of Behaviors	<p>Command ← ● coercion ● inducement</p>	<p>agenda setting ● attraction ● Co-opt →</p>
Most Likely Resources	<p>force sanctions payments bribes</p>	<p>institutions values culture policies</p>

Figure 4 - Difference between hard and soft power. Nye (2008,p.8)

According to Coronado (2005, p.322), on the one hand, the term soft power describes the application of unconventional, non-military capabilities such as political ideology, cultural appeal, or the ability to influence the political agendas of other nations. Its goal is to create allies, strengthen the legitimacy of one's moral authority to use power, and acquire legitimacy for one's foreign policy.

Hard power, on the other hand, is a strategy that uses the obvious application of force rather than persuasion to accomplish desired goals. Some people believe it to be a swifter and more effective way to achieve goals, avoiding the formal and substantive legitimacy of reaching a consensus that is mandated by international law and institutions.

"Hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one's purpose by affecting the behavior of others." (Nye, 2008, p.7)

This distinction highlights the difference between persuading someone and persuading them, as the former can be more approachable and less challenging, whilst the latter can be more substantial.

"The indirect way to get what you want has sometimes been called "the second face of power." A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness-want to follow it." (Nye, 2008, p.5)

The main goal of soft power is that, rather than coercing others to agree with you, soft power co-opts them to do so. The objective is to gain respect and, consequently, appeal for one's beliefs, customs, and policies. By using agendas to shape other people's behavior through the lens of their own interests in the global arena, a state can exert soft power. This can be accomplished, for instance, by sporting achievement, cultural accomplishments, or academic performance. (Nye, 2008, p.76) One of the leading examples could be Hollywood, which has a movie industry in the USA. However, Nye (2008, p.76) discussed that Europe is currently the US's closest rival in terms of soft power resources. European literature, art, music, fashion, design, and cuisine have long been popular all over the world. He elaborated on his idea, and mentioned that possible soft power resources may be France's attractiveness to tourists, higher life expectancy in France, Germany, and Italy, and from the sports field, football. "Soccer, Europe's primary sport, is far more popular globally than American football or baseball." (Nye,2008, p.76).

A country's soft power results from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. "The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)" (Nye, 2008, p.11)

Nye states that a nation is more likely to achieve its goals when its policies and culture uphold universal ideals and interests because of the bonds of obligation and attractiveness they foster. Soft power is less likely to emerge from narrow values and localized cultures. A universalistic culture is beneficial to the United States. (Nye,2008, p.11) It is important to mention that this is not to dispute that popular culture frequently serves as a soft power resource, but as we already saw, the context determines how effective any power tool is.

Another possible source of soft power, according to Nye (2008, p.13), is governmental policies. Likewise, foreign policy has a significant effect on soft power. However, a nation's soft power can be strengthened or undermined by its policies. Soft power can be undermined by international or domestic policies that come across as hypocritical, arrogant, unconcerned

with other people's viewpoints, or predicated on a limited view of national interests. For instance, in the polls conducted following the 2003 Iraq War, which showed a sharp drop in the United States' appeal, those who held negative opinions primarily claimed they were responding to the Bush administration and its policies rather than the country as a whole. (Nye, 2008, p.14)

According to Nye (2008,p.147), the best way a country can utilize its power is to learn how to unite soft and hard power to maximize the best outcome for it. He calls this connection smart power and proposes that if a country wants to maximize its foreign policy goals, it needs to learn how to use smart power. He claims that the US used smart power during the Cold War, but shifted away after 9/11, as it is more important to fight terrorism than to win the souls and hearts. (Nye,2008, p.108)

Although Nye's concept of soft power has become a cornerstone in the field of international relations, it did not escape some critique for being too conceptually vague, analytical limitations, or the fact that it is focused on democracies, and it is hardly usable when applied to authoritarian regimes.

One of the first critiques is the difficulty of measuring soft power. According to Yukarıç (2017, p.498), it is impossible to prove that the soft power of another country causes one nation to change its behavior. Seymour (2020) elaborates on this idea that the success of soft power is hard to measure because it is difficult to quantify. Both hard power and the outcomes of its applications are simple counting games, with a greater emphasis on measurable resources (money, soldiers, bullets). The goal of soft power is to alter attitudes, which is a difficult "thing" to quantify or rank.

Nye (2008, p.12) himself has acknowledged this limitation: "Of course, Coke and Big Macs do not necessarily attract people in the Islamic world to love the United States. The North Korean dictator, Kim Jong, is alleged to like pizza and American videos, but that does not affect his nuclear programs. Excellent wines and cheeses do not guarantee attraction to France, nor does the popularity of Pokémon games assure that Japan will get the policy outcomes it wishes."

While soft power aims to explain the ability of a country to influence other countries through attraction and cultural appeal, the absence of measurable indicators makes it difficult to use as a measuring tool. "Yet, it is not possible to prove that one country changes its actions according to other country's image" (Yukarıç, 2017,p.498)

However, we can not deny that there are certain attempts to measure the soft power of countries, such as the Soft Power 30 initiative, which is conducting interviews with 500 citizens from 25 countries. They then rank the countries according to the answers retrieved, and measure soft power based on their cuisine, government agenda, or culture. (Portland Communications, n.d.) Figure 5 below shows the exact collection data.

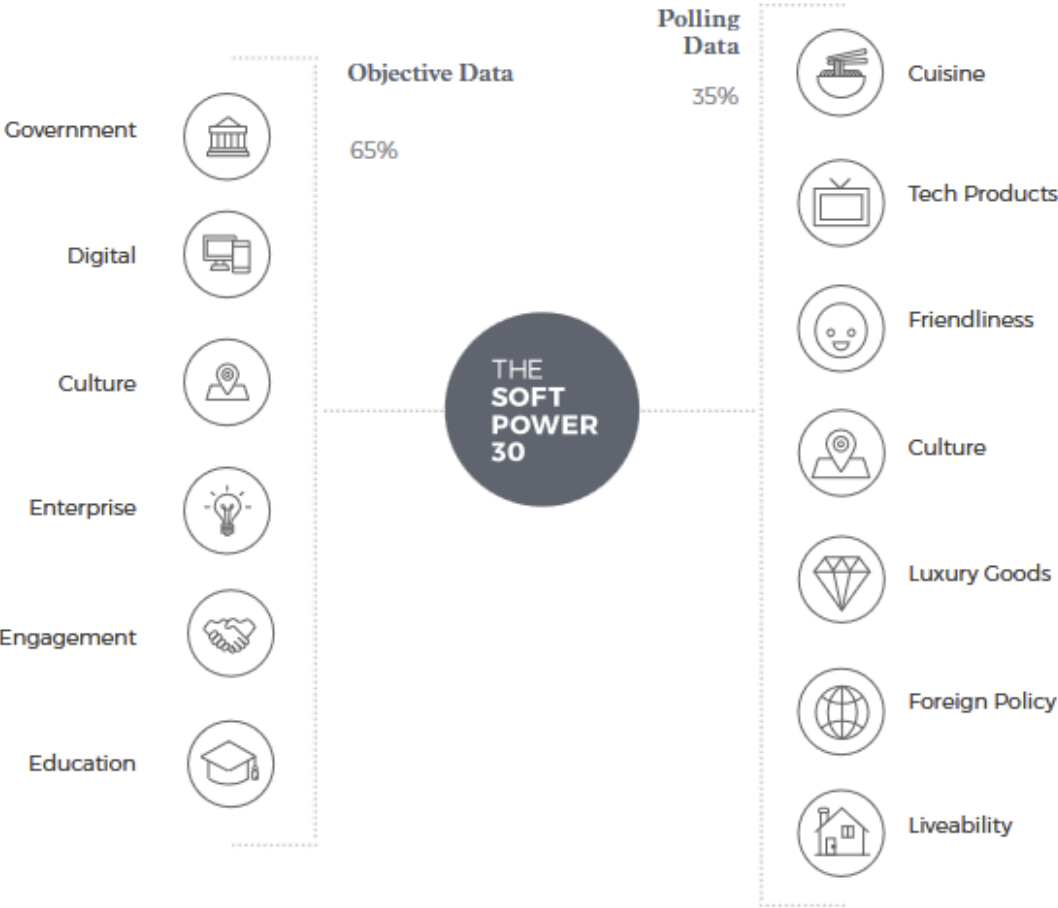


Figure 5. - The Soft power 30 data collection. Portland Communications. (n.d.).

While soft power provides the basics and the theoretical foundation for understanding how states can or want to attract others through culture or ideology, it does not fully explain how this attraction works. This gap is where public diplomacy becomes a very relevant concept.

According to Nye (2008, p.95), to comprehend the connection between soft power and public diplomacy, it is critical to distinguish between power expressed in terms of resources and power expressed in terms of behavioral outcomes. The resources that generate soft power in international politics come mainly from the values that a nation or organization demonstrates in its culture, in the models it sets through its internal procedures and policies, and in the way

it manages its relationships with other nations. Governments utilize public diplomacy as a tool to gather these resources in order to interact with and appeal to the people of different countries, not just their governments. Through broadcasting, cultural export subsidies, exchanges, and other means, public diplomacy seeks to draw attention to these potential resources. However, public diplomacy that "broadcasts" a nation's culture, values, and policies cannot generate soft power if their content is unappealing.

In other words, while soft power is a good tool to identify what makes a country attractive, public diplomacy represents the strategic process by which this attractiveness is used and communicated on the international stage.

As cited in Dubinsky (2019,p.160), "Through the lenses of international relations and political science, countries use public diplomacy and soft power to achieve a better image and international goals (Cull 2008; Gilboa 2008; Nye 2004)."

While soft power highlights the importance of attraction as a power tool, public diplomacy will provide the means through which this attraction is cultivated and projected. The next chapter will explore public diplomacy and its use in International Relations.

2.3 Public Diplomacy

As discussed above, soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them. (Nye,2008) Therefore, soft power is a political tactic meant to foster collaboration and enhance a nation's reputation; public diplomacy is how this tactic is promoted overseas. (Piccoli (2023, p.14)

That means that public diplomacy involves all efforts made by states to influence foreign audiences and try to build a positive image abroad.

According to Leonard, Stead, and Smewing (2002, p.8), public diplomacy is all about creating relationships: understanding the requirements of other countries, cultures, and peoples; communicating our points of view; correcting misconceptions, and finding common ground. The difference between public and traditional diplomacy is that public diplomacy involves a far larger group of people on both sides, as well as a much broader range of interests than the current administration.

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on the relationship and interactions between governments, public diplomacy is directed at the people of these governments directly.

Snow & Cull (2020, p. 8) adds further depth to this distinction, noting: "Traditional public diplomacy has been about governments talking to global publics and includes those efforts to inform, influence, and engage those publics in support of national objectives and foreign policies. Public diplomacy involves the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly and indirectly those public attitudes and opinions that bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions, or increasingly network to network."

It was acknowledged in diplomatic practice long before the current discussion of public diplomacy that it is one of the most essential tools of soft power. During the Cold War, the former Soviet Union, the United States, and the three main European countries made very large investments in their "communications with the world" (Melissen, 2005,p.4)

The concept of public diplomacy emerged during the Cold War as a response to the need for a non-military influence in international relations. The term "public diplomacy" was allegedly first used in the middle of the 1960s by Edmund Gullion, a former American diplomat and dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Over the next few decades, the practice of public diplomacy became most closely linked to the United States. As cited in Snow & Cull (2020, p. 45), an early brochure from the Murrow Center offered a handy summary of Gullion's idea as: "Public diplomacy ... deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications"

Public diplomacy has emerged as a response to the growing ideological differences between the US and the Soviet Union. According to Gilboa (2006, p.717), it became evident that the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, would use information and persuasion campaigns as their primary weapons in their global ideological and strategic conflict because of the devastating potential of nuclear weapons.

It was crucial for the nations, particularly the US and Russia, to interact with the outside world during this time and to showcase their new technologies, objectives, and accomplishments. The term public diplomacy is frequently used as a synonym for

propaganda. Journalists have described it as a rudimentary method of conveying messages that might or might not be accurate. (Leonard, Stead, and Smewing, 2002, p.8) However, when done correctly, public diplomacy is a two-way street, an ongoing process with mutual influence, in contrast to propaganda, which conveys a message in a one-way fashion between the audience and the government. (Dubinsky,2019, p.157) This distinction between one-way propaganda and classical public diplomacy highlights the transformation that began during the Cold War and was evolving for the upcoming decades as the states understood the power and value of foreign publics by communicating more with them.

In addition to governmental audiences, both elite and general public diplomacy aim to assist traditional diplomacy by speaking to nongovernmental audiences. (Leonard, Stead, and Smewing, 2002, p.12) The goal of public diplomacy is to establish relationships by learning about the needs of other nations, cultures, and peoples; expressing our own opinions; clearing up misunderstandings; and searching for areas where we can work together. A far greater number of people on both sides and a wider range of interests that extend beyond those of the current government are involved in public diplomacy, which is different from traditional diplomacy. (Leonard, Stead, and Smewing, 2002, p.8)

After the end of the Cold War era and the rise of globalisation and the rapid improvement of technologies, public diplomacy has evolved and become more important. It has evolved beyond state-led broadcasting into what scholars started calling in the beginning of the 21st century as the new public diplomacy. Gilboa (2006, p.717) describes it as a continuous intellectual effort to adjust public diplomacy research and analysis to the information era.

Melissen (2005, p.189) supports this and adds that "Public diplomacy must engage in dialogues with a broad range of players in foreign civil societies. This requires a more open and perhaps humble approach, which recognizes that no one has a monopoly on truth or virtue, that other ideas may be valid, and that the outcome may be different from the initial message being promoted. If the aim is to convince, rather than just win, and the process is to have credibility, the dialogue must be genuine."

As noted in Gilboa (2006, p.718), it is suggested that the New Public Diplomacy encompasses the following components because this definition is a little unclear and constrained: it is pursued by both states and non-state actors (such as NGOs); it is founded on "soft power," two-way communication, strategic public diplomacy, information management, nation branding, and e-image; it involves domesticating foreign policy; and it addresses both

immediate and long-term issues. Despite what many people believe, the New Public Diplomacy is not merely public relations or propaganda. It is a method of communication intended to establish a conversation with both enemies and allies. It necessitates the ability to use reliable information effectively in an effort to influence actors to comprehend, agree with, or support policies and actions. While only nations engaged in classical public diplomacy, both states and non-state actors—including private citizens, businesses, media outlets, terrorist groups, military alliances, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations—engage in new public diplomacy.

Nye (2008, p.107) distinguishes three main types of public diplomacy. The first dimension, which reflects the growing need to align communications with traditional diplomacy, is the management of communications on daily issues, which entails explaining context on decisions made regarding both domestic and foreign policy. Government representatives in contemporary democracies typically carefully consider what they should say to the media and how to say it after making choices. They tend to concentrate on the domestic press, but the foreign press corps must be the most crucial component of the first public diplomacy dimension.

The second dimension is strategic communications. Historically, governments have been adept at expressing their positions on specific topics but less successful at controlling how the public views the nation as a whole. The fact that various institutions have handled politics, trade, tourism, investment, and cultural relations is one of the causes of this..(Leonard, Stead, and Smewing, 2002,p.14) Governments use strategic communications in which, similarly to a political advertising campaign, the government develops a series of straightforward themes. To brand the main themes or promote a specific government policy, the campaign organizes symbolic events and communications throughout the year.

The third and longest-term component of public diplomacy is creating lasting relationships with influential people through training, seminars, conferences, exchanges, scholarships, real and virtual networks, and media access. Approximately 700,000 people have engaged in American academic and cultural exchanges during the postwar decades, which have aided in the education of global leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Schmidt, and Anwar Sadat. (Nye,2004, p.109) It focuses on building relationships between peers, such as politicians, special advisers, businesspeople, cultural entrepreneurs, or academics, which is different from the customary diplomatic practice of cultivating contacts. This can occur in any

of the three areas of public diplomacy and is intended to establish a shared understanding of issues and provide individuals with a better understanding of the reasons behind their behavior so that much of the preparatory work has already been completed by the time they discuss specific issues. (Leonard, Stead, and Smewing, 2002, p.18)

According to Leonard, Stead, and Smewing (2002, p.95), public diplomacy must be seen as a core activity that occurs with a wide variety of partners and in multiple dimensions. It can no longer be seen as an adjunct to other aspects of diplomacy. The foundation of public diplomacy is the notion that a nation's reputation and image are public resources that have the power to facilitate or obstruct specific transactions.

Public diplomacy includes a broad range of activities that function both independently and in line with the specific objectives and practice of foreign policy. (Snow & Cull 2020, p.420)

Nation branding and public diplomacy are also evaluated as tools of soft power. (Yukaruç, 2017, p.494) While public diplomacy shapes the perceptions through communications, nation branding complements this by showcasing a country's image as a marketable brand. The next chapter will explore nation branding.

2.4 Nation Branding

Nation branding is very closely related to public diplomacy. It focuses on building a beneficial national image that is appealing not only to foreign publics and people of governments as stated above, but also to investors, tourists, or states. This national image is becoming increasingly important as we live in a heavily globalised, technologically advanced world, and the states understand the need to manage their international image.

According to Yukaruç (2017, p.495), like public diplomacy, nation branding can change people's perceptions of one another. It is a relatively new idea compared to public diplomacy, and it has started to be accepted widely. Despite being more closely related to public relations, the concept of soft power can be linked to certain aspects of it.

Despite some similarities, such as they all affect a country's image and perception, the terms national identity, nation/place branding, and public diplomacy are fundamentally distinct. (Dubinsky,2023, p.27)

As cited in Dubinsky (2023, p.27), "the term public diplomacy originated during the Cold War and comes from the fields of political science and public relations. The term nation

branding is directly connected to business management and marketing, analyzing images and brands, and researching destinations."

While nation branding and public diplomacy share some similarities, they also differ in some ways. Gilboa (2008, p.68) states that relationship building, managing one's image and symbols, and making extensive use of the media are examples of similarities. Goals or results, increased sales versus foreign policy, methods, communication styles, management, language, and culture are among the distinctions.

This raises the question: what exactly is nation branding? While soft power is fundamentally about attraction and public diplomacy is about engaging and communicating with foreign publics, nation branding is the strategic management of a country's image as a brand.

Dinnie (2015, p.15) defined it as the "unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences."

The rise of nation branding is definitely tied to the increase in globalisation and global interconnectedness. One of the primary sources of information about international events is now the Internet and global networks. States, communities, businesses, NGOs, and even individuals have many opportunities to share ideas about global issues via the Internet. (Gilboa,2008, p.56)

As stated in Fan (2010, p.98), "nation branding is concerned with a country's whole image on the international stage, covering political, economic, and cultural dimensions."

The goal is not only to project a positive image abroad, but also to manage and respond to the perceptions and reactions of other countries. Fan (2010, p.101) adds that nation branding is the process of developing, tracking, evaluating, and proactively managing a country's image in order to raise or strengthen its standing with a target global audience. According to international stakeholders, a nation's brand is the culmination of all of its perceptions, which may include the following: people, location, culture/language, history, cuisine, fashion, well-known faces (celebrities), international brands, and so forth. (Fan 2010, p.98)

Although branding is a process carried out by the government or the nation itself, the target audiences—in the case of nation branding, foreigners and foreign governments—determine the image and reputation of the country. (Fan,2010, p.100)

There is some disagreement in academia regarding the origins and definitions of nation branding. Although the concept of nation branding is relatively new in academia, the roots could be traced across other disciplines. One of the first texts regarding nation branding is the book from 1993 by Kotler, Haider, and Rein by the name of Marketing Places. Despite lacking a clear brand perspective, this text provides a broad economic and marketing framework for much of the subsequent work in the field. (Dinnie,2015, p.20) The term nation branding itself was coined by Simon Anholt in 1996, where he argued that a country's reputation may function similarly to that of a large corporation or a firm. (Dinnie,2015, p.22)

"I first began to write about an idea I called nation branding in 1996. My original observation was a simple one: that the reputations of countries function like the brand images of companies and that they are equally critical to the progress and prosperity of those countries." (Dinnie,2015, p.22) Anholt's initial findings and insights lead to a more structured academic exploration of its roots.

Figure 6 charts the development of nation branding according to Dinnie (2015, p.21). It illustrates how the academic disciplines of national identity and country-of-origin interact in the context of economic globalization, which has the paradoxical effects of homogenizing markets while simultaneously fostering a stronger sense of national identity..

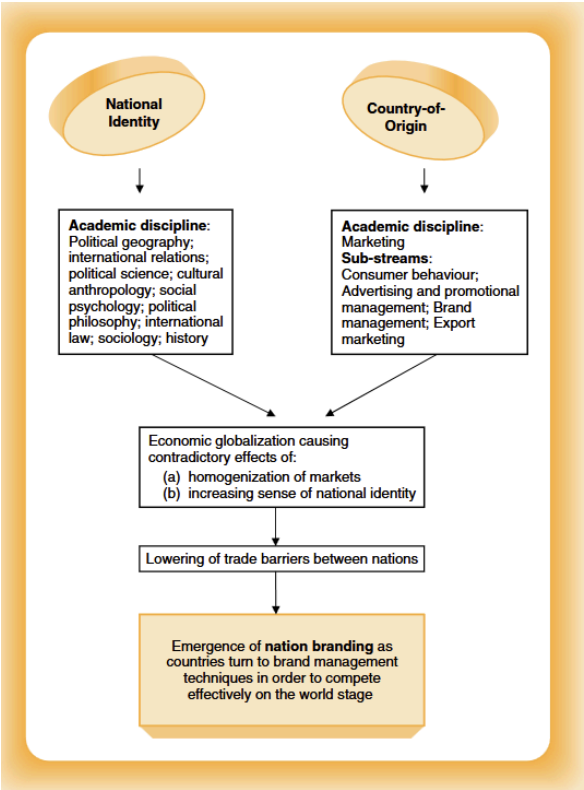


Figure 6 - The development of Nation branding. Dinnie (2015, p.21)

Fan (2010) supports this statement and adds two more sources: place or destination branding and public diplomacy. As cited in Fan (2010, p.98) "Although a relatively new subject, the origin of nation branding study can be traced to four different sources, namely, country of origin (COO) (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993, 2002), place or destination branding (Kotler et al, 1993; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan et al, 2002), and more recently, public diplomacy (Van Ham, 2001; Melissen, 2005; Fan, 2008a), and national identity (Smith, 1991; Bond et al, 2003)."

Dubinsky (2023, p.30), on the other hand, states that the study of nation branding is particularly influenced by business studies viewpoints that emphasize sponsorship, marketing, and management.

Dinnie (2015, p.20) offers yet another layer to the development of nation branding. He states that to place the development of nation branding in a broader historical context, it could be argued that countries have always branded themselves through their names, anthems, symbols, and currency, and that the term nation branding is new, not the practice itself.

As mentioned above, there are some inconsistencies also regarding the goals of nation branding. As cited in Fan (2010, p.100), "A close examination of some major definitions of the nation branding concepts shows significant differences in the focus and purpose or outcome of branding the nation:

1. To remould national identities (Olins, 1999).
2. To enhance a nation's competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Lee, 2009).
3. To embrace political, cultural, business, and sport activities (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001).
4. To promote economic and political interests at home and abroad (Rendon, 2003; Szondi,2007).
5. To alter, improve or enhance a nation's image/reputation (Gudjonsson, 2005; Fan, 2006,2008b)."

Dubinsky argues that while the general understanding of nation branding as an attempt by governments or other non-state actors is to achieve a better image of a country, there are multiple definitions of the term and what it exactly captures. Therefore, there are different definitions of nation branding and what it actually means, particularly in relation to public diplomacy and national identity, even though it is generally accepted that nation branding is

an effort by governments and other non-state actors to improve the country's image. Place branding, nation branding, and country branding are sometimes used interchangeably. Nation branding, on the other hand, refers to a country's overall branding, whereas place branding primarily refers to the tourism aspect of branding a particular location or destination. (Dubinsky,2023, p.32)

It is essential to understand how these strategies are and can be applied in practice. One of the most powerful and emerging platforms is sports and mega-events. Sports, and mainly sports events, have been one of the main components of nation branding and its tactics, and have been used by various governments for nation branding.

As Dubinsky (2023, p.33) states, sports events have been used by nations, cities, and communities as branding tools to enhance their national image, accomplish social, political, and economic objectives, and take advantage of future opportunities. Sports are used differently by different regimes. For instance, the British attempted to use the London 2012 Olympic Games to renovate East London and focus on sustainability, while the Chinese government used the 2008 Olympic Games to showcase a powerful image of China by spending over \$40 billion on the games and exposing Chinese technologies.

Dubinsky (2023, p.33) uses Qatar as one of his examples of some countries using sports and sports events for nation-building purposes. Qatar, a wealthy nation with plenty of resources, is using its wealth for hard power to maintain its security, and sporting events have evolved into a means of constructing infrastructure as well as showcasing the nation to the outside world. As a result, once more, the interdisciplinary nature of the fields leads to overlapping categories for attempts to use sports to enhance a nation's reputation and accomplish domestic and global objectives.

In recent years, one of the most visible and controversial applications of nation branding, especially by authoritarian regimes, was sportswashing.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

3.1 Research design and Approach

In this thesis, a qualitative single case study approach will be used in order to explore the research question: *How does Saudi Arabia use sportswashing to build soft power and reshape its international image?* The research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm that emphasizes the importance of context, meaning, and narrative. As Alharahsheh and Pius (2020, p.41) put it, interpretivism takes into account variations in cultures, situations, and historical periods that resulted in the formation of various social realities. As noted in Muzari, Shava, & Shonhiwa 2022,p.14), in order to better understand the surrounding circumstances, qualitative research emphasizes how people interpret and make sense of their experiences in order to comprehend the social reality of individuals. This makes the qualitative research design a useful tool, as it emphasizes interpretation over measurement and is well suited to study social phenomena within their contextual setting.

In this paper, the case study of Saudi Arabia will be examined via a case study by analyzing key government documents, websites, and secondary sources. According to Gerring (2004) a case study can be defined as “ an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.” (Gerring.2004, p.432) The degree of detail that a case study provides is one of its key advantages.

The case study method is beneficial and suitable for an in-depth analysis of political communication and image projection strategies by enabling close examination of primary sources such as government documents or reports from ministries.

The study does not seek to measure policy success through quantitative indicators but rather to interpret how the Saudi state uses sport to construct a new identity and rebrand the Kingdom on the world stage. The case selection of Saudi Arabia was based on the fact that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is among the most active, if not the most active, authoritarian states that engage in sportswashing across motorsport, football, golf, esports, or boxing and joins its other neighbours from the Gulf region in this activity. Moreover, Saudi Arabia provides a good example of how sports can function as an instrument for diplomacy and reputation. The case was chosen as it showcases a multi-faceted, state-led campaign to use sport for reputational purposes.

The research is theory-driven and applies three overlapping frameworks of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding. The research design is structured around five empirical domains of hosting mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities,

sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing in international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights, and finally, engaging and using well-renowned athletes.

The limitations of the study are the bias of sources, time-related scope, and the measurement of effectiveness.. The bias of sources is present on both sides of the story. While state narratives are promotional, the Western media may reflect some geopolitical bias. The time-related scope is regarding the Saudi Vision 2030, as it is an ongoing project and not a finished one; some outcomes might be speculative. This study captures the Kingdom's sportswashing efforts and their reception up to 2025. The measurement of effectiveness is based on the results, as soft power and public perception are very individual and difficult to quantify; this study does not attempt to measure the reputational change directly, but instead interprets the criticism by public reactions.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data used in this study will be document-based, drawing on three main categories - Primary sources, secondary sources, and media content data in order to analyze and explore the sportswashing strategies of Saudi Arabia. The research uses qualitative document analysis as its primary data collection method. According to Morgan (2022, p.64), "this method consists of analyzing various types of documents, including books, newspaper articles, academic journal articles, and institutional reports." The data was recovered from a sample of documents based on relevance, credibility, and coverage of the sportswashing strategy. The sources include official documents such as the Saudi Vision 2030, the 2034 FIFA World Cup Bid Book, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism announcements, the Sport Investment Forum report, and press releases from state-owned companies such as Saudi Aramco or Visit Saudi. The sources also include academic literature on soft power, nation branding, public diplomacy, and sportswashing, including scholars such as Nye, Dinnie, Fan, or Dubinsky. The last source type is media content and International NGO reports, including BBC, The Guardian, Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Watch. This mix of sources enables the analysis of state narratives, public reactions, and scholarly interpretation.

The data was analysed in a way that the five domains of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategies (as identified above) served as the initial coding categories. Within each, the material was analysed for narrative, such as what the story that the Kingdom is trying to tell

is, audience targeting, what the public is being targeted, and the credibility analysis, whether the projected image is in line with domestic reality. These themes were examined using the theoretical lenses of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding in order to evaluate the effectiveness and the contradictions of the sportswashing tactic implied.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Political and Strategic Context

Saudi Arabia is situated between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea on the Arabian Peninsula. Officially, the king is known as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The modern Saudi state was established in 1932 by Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud following a 30-year effort to unite the majority of the Arabian Peninsula. The nation's 1992 Basic Law mandates that one of its male descendants lead the country today. (Central Intelligence Agency, 2025) The kingdom is ruled by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, together with his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), as the de facto leader who is using and exercising extensive influence over the nation's domestic and foreign policy. Saudi Arabia is the largest Gulf state, home to 33 million people, with a GDP per capita of \$61,923 based on purchasing power parity. (International Monetary Fund, 2025) The nation is a major producer of natural gas and oil. Particularly since Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2005, the government has persisted in promoting foreign investment and economic reform and diversification. The government continues to worry about a growing population, aquifer depletion, and an economy heavily reliant on petroleum production and prices. (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2025) With roughly 17% of the world's petroleum reserves, Saudi Arabia has the second-largest oil reserves in the world. (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024) As a result, Saudi has created enormous wealth, which it invests in through its Public Investment Fund (PIF), one of the world's most significant sovereign wealth funds. (Hay & Kwok, 2023)

Despite its vast wealth and economic strength, Saudi Arabia faces significant international criticism, primarily due to its poor human rights records involving women, minorities, or LGBTQI+ communities, and also in its involvement in regional conflicts or domestic political repression. According to Amnesty International, the main concerns are freedom of expression, unfair trials, the rights of migrants, death penalties, and women's and girls' rights. (Amnesty International, 2025)

To try and fight this political and reputational backdrop, Mohammed bin Salman unveiled in 2016 the Saudi Vision 2030. The Saudi Vision 2030 is a strategic blueprint that is designed to diversify the economy of Saudi Arabia, reduce its dependency on oil and natural resources, and fundamentally change the perception of the country's global image.

The Vision 2030 plan, which Saudi Arabia unveiled in April 2016, aims to diversify the economy, lessen reliance on oil, and grow service industries like healthcare, education, building infrastructure, tourism, and recreation, among many other areas. The Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Plan's comprehensive reforms have an impact on many facets of the government, the economy, and the populace. As the government works to diversify its revenue streams away from oil and address more general social and economic goals, tax policy will be crucial to these reforms. This is all while preserving a business-friendly climate and luring in foreign direct investment (FDI). (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2025) As Arvas explains (2016, as cited in Yüçetürk & Keskin, 2022,p.125), in an effort to diversify its revenue streams and abandon the oil-based economic model, Riyadh has devised new plans for the growth of non-oil sectors, with PIF serving as the driving force behind these plans. One of the most valuable companies in the world, Aramco, a Saudi oil subsidiary, was made available to the public for this purpose, and a resource worth about \$3 trillion was established for PIF subsidiaries. It is stated in the Saudi Vision 2030 document as follows :

"As such, we will transform Aramco from an oil-producing company into a global industrial conglomerate. We will transform the Public Investment Fund into the world's largest sovereign wealth fund. We will encourage our major corporations to expand across borders and take their rightful place in global markets" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.7)

The purpose of Vision 2030 is to explicitly put Saudi Arabia as a modern and progressive nation by 2030 with the aim to transform the kingdom's economy, society, and international reputation:

"Our Vision is a strong, thriving, and stable Saudi Arabia that provides opportunity for all. Our Vision is a tolerant country with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method. We will welcome qualified individuals from all over the world and will respect those who have come to join our journey and our success." (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.7)

To achieve this, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is based on three main pillars. The first pillar of their Vision is to establish Saudi Arabia as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. The second pillar of their Vision is their commitment to becoming a global investment powerhouse. The third pillar is transforming their unique strategic location into an international hub connecting three continents, Asia, Europe, and Africa. Their geographic position between key global waterways makes the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia an epicenter of trade and the gateway to the world. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.6)

To succeed in the objectives that will transform Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 identifies multiple strategic sectors. Among these are the manufacturing sector, the industrial equipment sector, the tourism and leisure sectors, and the technology sector. However, sports are not a standalone sector; they are one of the strategic pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030. It is embedded under the goals related to the quality of life, tourism, culture, and entertainment. Sport, according to the Vision 2030 blueprint, is a vital tool for improving public health, increasing citizen participation, enhancing social cohesion, and strengthening national identity domestically. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,2016) Moreover, sports are seen as essential instruments for reshaping the kingdom's global reputation, promoting diplomatic relationships, and enhancing Saudi Arabia's soft power.

"A healthy and balanced lifestyle is an essential mainstay of a high quality of life. Yet opportunities for the regular practice of sports have often been limited. This will change. We intend to encourage widespread and regular participation in sports and athletic activities, working in partnership with the private sector to establish additional dedicated facilities and programs. This will enable citizens and residents to engage in a wide variety of sports and leisure pursuits. We aspire to excel in sport and be among the leaders in selected sports regionally and globally." (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.22)

This positioning reveals how the Saudi regime seeks to use sport, divert attention, and offset reputational damage not through political reform regarding the freedom of media or individuals, but through systemic and symbolic association with global sports.

The Ministry of Sport was tasked with overseeing the ambitious targets that were set in the Saudi Vision 2030. Among these targets were the increased sports participation rates among the Saudi population and attracting international mega-events to the Saudi Kingdom. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)

According to the Ministry of Sports, it has multiple objectives in the field of sports. These objectives are divided into four main categories: organizing, empowering, enhancing the quality of the sports sector, and achieving organizational excellence. (Digital Government Authority, n.d.) Figure 7 shows the individual categories.

First Axis

Organizing the sports sector through:

- ⊙ Leading strategic planning within the sector.
- ⊙ Developing and implementing a comprehensive regulatory framework.
- ⊙ Governing and managing a well-organized and efficient sector.
- ⊙ Enhancing the efficiency of planning and financial management processes in the sector.

Second Axis

Empowering the sports sector through:

- ⊙ Raising awareness about sports in Saudi Arabia.
- ⊙ Engaging the private sector.
- ⊙ Developing an efficient digital sports sector.
- ⊙ Enhancing the presence of Saudi sports on the international stage.
- ⊙ Building effective partnerships and promoting corporate social responsibility practices.

Third Axis

Enhancing the quality of the sports sector through:

- ⊙ Enhancing the experience of beneficiaries.
- ⊙ Developing a system for hosting major global events.
- ⊙ Providing world-class sports facilities and optimizing their utilization.
- ⊙ Developing human capabilities within the sector.

Fourth Axis

Achieving organizational excellence through:

- ⊙ Developing and establishing an appropriate operational model.
- ⊙ Growing and diversifying revenue streams.
- ⊙ Enhancing institutional culture and attracting the best human resources.
- ⊙ Digitizing services and processes at the ministry level.
- ⊙ Adopting advanced and flexible standards and principles at the ministry level.

Figure 7. Categories of sport objectives in the field of sports in Saudi Arabia. (Digital Government Authority, n.d.)

The Ministry is focusing not only on the international sports arena, but also on the domestic one. As mentioned above, Vision 2030 envisions a healthy and high-quality life for Saudi Arabia's citizens. As a result, the Ministry of Sports has created the Quality of Life Program. "One of the initiatives of the Quality of Life Program is the 'Development and Implementation of the National Sports Training Strategy' initiative, which aims to train and support the qualification of national cadres." (Digital Government Authority, n.d.) As noted on the Ministry of Sports website, it is a key initiative for the Saudi Vision 2030.

"The Quality of Life Program, a key initiative of Saudi Vision 2030, promotes the training and development of national talent in sectors related to quality of life, including the sports sector, which has experienced significant development in recent years." (Digital Government Authority, n.d.)

Both objectives, international and domestic, have been underlined by significant state investments in sports infrastructure. Among these, we can find the construction of new modern stadiums, training centres, or specialized sports cities. Under the Vision 2030 project, Saudi Arabia explicitly uses sport to project an image of openness, hospitality, and modernity. It does it all in a very strategic way, addressed to the international public. One of the prominent examples of this is the takeover of Newcastle United Football Club through the Saudi Public Investment Fund (BBC Sport, 2021). This move is explicitly framed as a strategic move to enhance Saudi Arabia's global visibility and cultural soft power. It is essential to state that, despite claims from Saudi Arabia, regarding its clear intentions, they are facing ongoing international criticism and allegations of sportswashing.

Additionally, the Saudi state is actively supporting high profile international sport events, ranging from hosting Formula 1 races, boxing matches involving high tier athletes, hosting football cup finals, such as the Copa del Rey or the LIV Golf Tour, that is funded by PIF with the intention to rebrand Saudi Arabia on the global stage.

"Through Vision 2030, the Kingdom has opened up to the world, and we have invited the world to Saudi Arabia – with sport as a great connector. Substantial investments in grassroots and professional sports are not only creating greater global engagement but also diversifying the economy, creating a more vibrant society and promoting a healthier lifestyle for the Saudi people." (Al Saud, n.d.)

Saudi Arabia's extensive sports strategy under the 2030 Vision is a clear reflection of an ambitious and multifaceted approach. On the one hand, it uses sports domestically in order to achieve social cohesion, youth engagement, and improved public health. On the other hand, it uses sport on an international level for diplomatic engagement and nation branding, and to enhance its soft power position not only in the Middle East but also globally. Despite all of these strategic ambitions, the Kingdom's sport-related initiatives continue to generate global debate and criticism, especially regarding their motivations and implications.

In the next part of the analysis, the specific sportswashing strategies that are pursued by Saudi Arabia will be examined in greater detail. Among these are the hosting of mega-events, infrastructural investments, global sponsorship deals, international sport investments, and, lastly, celebrity athlete endorsements. This will provide an empirical foundation to get a clear understanding of how the Saudi Kingdom operationalizes its ambitions and future visions and

navigates in the complex interplay between soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing practices.

4.2. Hosting International Mega-Events

According to Müller (2018, p.634), mega-events are ambulatory events with a set duration that draw a large number of visitors, have a massive mediated reach, are very expensive, and have a significant impact on the population and the built environment. Roche (1994) elaborates on this and states that mega-events have long-term implications and consequences for the cities that host them.

"Mega-events (large scale leisure and tourism events such as Olympic Games and World Fairs) are short-term events with long-term consequences for the cities that stage them. They are associated with the creation of infrastructure and event facilities often carrying long-term debts and always requiring long-term use-programming. In addition, if successful, they project a new (or renewed) and perhaps persistent and positive image and identity for the host city through national and international media, particularly TV coverage." Roche (1994, p.1-2)

According to Gläbel, Scharpf, & Edwards (2025, p. 2), media outlets and millions of sports fans worldwide pay unprecedented attention to mega-events, which gives hosts the opportunity to raise their profile and reputation internationally. According to the International Olympic Committee, approximately 5 billion people, or 84% of the potential global audience, watched the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. (International Olympic Committee, 2024)

This can be used by regimes that seek to change or alter their image abroad. According to Grix & Lee (2013, p.8), this is a common feature of all states with a bad reputation abroad, though it is not always the main reason why states host or want to host major sporting events. Nonetheless, states with a negative image do often try to use these events to improve their image.

This logic also applies to efforts in sports tourism and soft power, where the hosting of such events could be an opportunity to project positive attributes to international audiences. As Alawi (2025, p.3) notes, "Hosting major sports events is a driving force for any country seeking prominence in sports tourism. A country can showcase its culture, economic wealth, and positive national identity during a sports event."

Over the last decade, Saudi Arabia has invested billions in hosting sporting mega-events. This effort is a part of the Vision 2030, the Kingdom's plan that aims to transform its economy,

reduce its dependence on oil, and rebrand the state on the global stage. According to Grix and Brannagan (2024, p.8), since the publication of Vision 2030 in 2016, Saudi Arabia has made professional sports an investment to accomplish many of the goals outlined in the document. In addition to spearheading the Kingdom's investment in European sport, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was responsible for the publication and articulation of the Vision document. He has made numerous significant investments in sports, sporting events, and sports sponsorship, frequently at exorbitant prices. Hosting major sport events has been a way to open Saudi Arabia to the world, boost its image, and generate new investments.

The public could get a closer look into the Saudi Kingdom's sport plans and achievements during the Sport Investment Forum, which is a "global platform dedicated to shaping the future of sports investment, innovation, and economic growth" (The Business Year, 2025). According to the official documents, sports and its usage are among the main pillars of countries in the region, and investing and hosting sport mega events have multiple advantages.

"Sports have become one of the strategic pillars for countries in the region, contributing to economic growth, fostering social development, and elevating international status. By developing infrastructure and hosting major sports events, regional countries are leveraging sports as a tool to boost the economy, stimulate tourism, and attract long-term investments." (Sports Investment Forum, 2025, p.17)

Since 2018, the Kingdom has intensified the hosting of sports events across multiple sports. Among these, we can find Formula 1, football, golf, boxing, esports, wrestling, and more. These events are a strategic tool that is used for international branding and reputation management, and in most cases, they shape the core of Saudi Arabia's sports washing activities. Hosting mega-events is presented by Saudi Arabia as a tool that will open the Kingdom to the public and the world and increase tourism and investment. As the Saudi Sports Investment Forum puts it, "Hosting the 2034 FIFA World Cup marks a transformative milestone that solidifies Saudi Arabia's position as a premier destination for sports investment, opening new horizons for global partnerships within Vision 2030." (Sports Investment Forum, 2025,p.13)

In the section below, the thesis will describe the biggest mega-events held and organized by Saudi Arabia, namely the hosting of Formula 1 races, LIV Golf events, the 2034 FIFA World Cup, and International Football Cup finals. Table 1 shows a list of the international sporting

events held by Saudi Arabia, including their event name, field of sport, location, and the respective years that they were hosted.

Table 1 - List of international sporting events in Saudi Arabia

Event	Sport	Location	Years
Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix	Motorsport	Jeddah - Jeddah Corniche Circuit	Annually since 2021
Diriyah E-Prix (Formula E)	Motorsport	Diriyah - Street Circuit	Annually since 2018
Dakar Rally	Motorsport	Various - Across Saudi Arabia	Annually since 2020
Anthony Joshua vs. Andy Ruiz Jr.	Boxing	Diriyah - Diriyah Arena	2019
Anthony Joshua vs. Oleksandr Usyk	Boxing	Jeddah - King Abdullah Sports City	2021
World Combat Games	Combat Sports	Riyadh - King Saud University Arena	2023
PFL MENA Championship	MMA	Riyadh - Green Halls	2024
UFC Event	MMA	Riyadh - Kingdom Arena	2024
Supercoppa Italiana	Football	Various - King Saud University Stadium / King Abdullah Sports City	2018, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024
Supercopa de España	Football	Various - King Fahd International Stadium	2020, 2022, 2023, 2025
FIFA Club World Cup	Football	Jeddah - King Abdullah Sports City	2023
WAFF Women's Championship	Football	Jeddah - King Abdullah Sports City	2024
WTA Finals	Tennis	Riyadh - King Saud University Sports Complex	Starting 2024
Saudi International	Golf	KAEC - Royal Greens Golf & Country Club	Annually since 2019
LIV Golf Invitational Series	Golf	Various - Royal Greens / Riyadh Golf Courses	Since 2022

The Saudi Cup	Equestrian	Riyadh - King Abdulaziz Racetrack	Annually since 2020
Esports World Cup	Esports	Riyadh - Boulevard Riyadh City	Annually since 2024
FIBA 3x3 World Tour Final	Basketball	Riyadh - King Saud University Outdoor Court	2023
IWF World Championships	Weightlifting	Riyadh - Riyadh International Convention & Exhibition Center	2023
Neom Beach Games	Beach Sports	Neom - Neom Bay	Annually since 2019
FIVB Men's Club World Championship	Volleyball	Jeddah - King Abdullah Sports City	2024
Saudi Masters	Badminton	Riyadh - King Saud University Indoor Hall	Starting 2024
ITTF World Tour Platinum	Table Tennis	Jeddah - King Abdullah Sports City	2025
Asia Rugby Sevens Series	Rugby	Riyadh - Prince Faisal bin Fahd Stadium	2023
PSA World Tour Finals	Squash	Riyadh - The Diplomatic Quarter Tennis Center	2024

Source : Transfermarkt, SIF, AllsportDB. TopendSports, The Saudi Ministry of Sport

4.2.1 Formula 1 - Saudi Arabian Grand Prix

Saudi Arabia made its entry into elite motorsports in 2021. It was the first year that they hosted the Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. After the announcement, the official F1 website stated that it "is the first of a long-term partnership that aims to reach new audiences and inspire millions" (Formula One World Championship Limited, 2020). Formula 1 has millions of fans worldwide and is a very popular sport. For nations like Saudi Arabia, hosting such a significant event offers a singular chance to pursue sports recognition. It enhances the country's reputation and draws a lot of tourists. (Alawi, 2025, p.3)

According to Ettinger (2023, p.535), Saudi Arabia spent \$644 million on contracts with several racing circuits in the motorsports industry, with the Formula One Championship being the main event. After hosting the event for 5 years straight and having a contract until 2027, the Kingdom is now looking to host two races in the near future. Prince Khalid bin Sultan al-Abdullah al-Faisal, the chairman of the Kingdom's automobile and motorcycle federation,

said after the 2025 race that "The sport is growing, the demand is growing, so I would not be surprised if Saudi, in the near future, will host two races. I wouldn't be surprised" (Reuters, 2023)

Moreover, according to the chairman, the possibility of owning a team in Formula 1 is also high. "If you are going to buy a Formula One team, then people will buy it to make money out of it, especially if it's going to be bought by one of the PIF companies." (Baldwin, 2025)

And the Saudi Kingdom has made a step forward in purchasing a team, with the PIF firstly investing into McLaren Group, which encompasses the McLaren F1 team, one of the most historic and legendary teams on the grid and the 2024 season champions. (Baldwin, 2025) Moreover, Aramco has become a sponsor and a part-time owner in the Aston Martin F1 team, holding more than 20%. There are many rumors that Aramco might attempt to purchase the team outright. (Baldwin, 2023)

The race has steadily attracted more and more views. According to Wilde (2025), the 2025 race has attracted an average of 1.5 million viewers, with a peak of 1.7 million. It was more than the 920,000 viewers of the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix the previous year.

According to the research made by Alawi (2025) regarding the popularity of the Saudi Grand Prix, hosting an event such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix is a great way to gain popularity and better the country's image to the outside world.

"Hosting the Formula 1 Grand Prix significantly influences the host country's destination image by showcasing its unique culture, infrastructure, and capacity to host world-class events. The findings reveal that the global media coverage, high-profile attendance, and fan engagement surrounding the event amplify positive perceptions of the host city, reinforcing the cognitive and affective components of its destination image" (Alawi,2025, p.15)

Despite all this, the Kingdom is under a lot of criticism from the public and international organisations like Amnesty International or Freedom House. Felix Jakens, Amnesty International UK's head of campaigns, stated in 2020 that the ongoing Saudi Grand Prix is part of the effort to sportswash the country's dreadful human rights record. (Cooper, 2020)

During the 2021 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, Lewis Hamilton protested the negative attitudes towards LGBT people in the Kingdom by racing with an LGBT helmet, and Sebastian Vettel, the driver for Aston Martin, also chose to wear rainbow-themed shoes to the pre-race press conference. (Yüçetürk & Keskin, 2022, p.130)

4.2.2 LIV Golf

The next big sporting mega-event chosen for this analysis is the LIV Golf League. Saudi Arabia made its entry into elite professional golf in 2022 with the launch of the LIV Golf League. According to Ettinger (2023, p.536), LIV was first proposed in 2019 as a replacement for the established Professional Golf Association (PGA) tour. According to their website, LIV was created for the passion for golf and engagement with the newer generations.

"The LIV Golf League is for the millions of us who love golf already – and for millions more who are just getting started. Our mission is to build on and complement the existing format of professional golf and take it to new levels of excitement and engagement with generations of fans. With events across the world, the LIV Golf League is bringing the game – and those who love to play and watch it – to new places." (LIV Golf, n.d.)

The tour is fully financed by PIF. LIV was designed not only as a sporting venture or competition but also as a strategic platform. As Davis, Plumley, and Wilson (2023, p.189) note, LIV Golf represents an entirely new and unprecedented method of funding and running a professional sporting event.

LIV Golf has quickly gained attention due to the finances involved regarding payouts for athletes. Here, LIV shocked the world with its massive prize pools and record-breaking signing bonuses. According to Ettinger (2023, p.536), the new tour was supposed to feature well-known players as its main attraction and offer prizes significantly greater than those that players would typically receive on the PGA Tour. Many famous male professional golfers have left the top professional golf tour, the PGA Tour, to join LIV Golf in exchange for outrageous signing-on fees and the opportunity to win up to \$4 million per event. (Davis, Plumley, & Wilson, 2023, p.194) This financial strategy has not only disrupted the landscape of professional golf but also significantly changed the competitive dynamics between the two big organisations. The promise of guaranteed winnings made the LIV a more affordable alternative to the PGA for golfers in the mid and lower tiers. In spring 2022, the inaugural LIV tournament had a \$25 million prize pool, with \$4 million going to the winners. Along with appearance fees and signing bonuses, the last-place finisher was guaranteed \$120,000. The biggest names, Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy, stayed with the PGA, but other essential players moved to the LIV tour. According to reports, Woods received an offer of up to \$800 million to join LIV, and he has refused this offer. (Ettinger,2023, p.536)

However, the move has been met with a lot of criticism and controversy. Critics called LIV the "bone saw tour," after the tool that was used to cut journalist Jamal Khashoggi's body. (Ettinger, 2023, p.536) Jamal Khashoggi was a US-based journalist and critic of Saudi Arabia's government, who was murdered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (BBC News, 2021)

According to Davis, Plumley, and Wilson (2023, p.194) the absence of sponsors or broadcasters for the first exhibition events has been widely documented in international media outlets as an overt instance of sportswashing, and as a result, the PGA Tour has banned all professional players participating in the LIV events from their tour.

The LIV Golf's establishment has been the most significant and most controversial event to date in their ongoing plan to promote the nation on the international sporting scene. (Davis, Plumley, & Wilson, 2023, p.196) Despite the backlash, LIV persisted, and now it is starting to reshape the world of global golf. In 2023, a shocking merger between LIV and the PGA was announced. A deal worth around 1.3 billion will give LIV an 11% stake in PGA and join the two circuits together, absorbing the critical players and bringing PGA players into a unified, but Saudi-led circuit. (Grimshaw, 2024)

Davis, Plumley, and Wilson (2023, p.200) elaborate on this idea, and they call this the fight to become a top men's professional golfer is just getting started, and noted that in this case, legitimacy is the most crucial element. The PIF's efforts to gain legitimacy on a worldwide basis could have a significant impact on professional golf as a whole; this movement has the potential to alter golf in the future significantly.

According to Reuters (2025), Saudi Arabia has spent over 5 billion on the LIV Golf Tour. While the defenders point to the Saudi Vision 2030 project, and argue that sports investments are part of a broader effort to diversify the Saudi economy, human rights groups such as Amnesty International see it differently and labelled LIV and its attempt to merge with PGA as a prime example of sportswashing that is designed to distract from internal repression and external criticism. "While this may have taken some golf fans and commentators by surprise, it's really just more evidence of the onward march of Saudi sportswashing." (Quintal, 2023)

Nevertheless, the LIV Golf story reveals a new model of influence, while it not only hosts events from this series, but also owns the tour and reshapes the structure of an entire sport. As Davis, Plumley, and Wilson (2023, p.196) state, "It became evident to many in the sport that the professional golfers who defected to the LIV tour for large sums of money were ready to

support the Saudi Arabian legitimacy push in global sport." And while LIV has shaken up the sport in ways that we have never seen before, the question arises: Is this innovation or just a strategic distraction from something else?

4.2.3 Football Mega-Events: Super Cups and the 2034 FIFA World Cup

Football, as such, will be the most used example in this thesis. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is using and leveraging football and its personalities on multiple levels. Among the most prominent ones are the hosting of football mega-events. This part of the analysis will focus on two main categories: the hosting of football Super Cups from Italy and Spain, and the hosting of the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

Saudi Arabia's deliberate strategy to host football mega-events has become one of, if not the best, and clearest examples of using sport to rebrand its image, gain soft power, and consolidate global recognition. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has spend billions of dollars on hosting these mega-events and intensified its efforts to bring world-class football to its country and new stadiums by staging European cup finals, bidding and engaging in regional tournaments such as the The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and ultimately securing the rights to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. These events then serve the Kingdom in two ways. Firstly, they put Saudi Arabia on the map and showcased its visibility to the general public abroad. Secondly, it ties the country to the global culture that football undoubtedly has while distracting attention from its domestic human rights controversies.

One of the first milestones in hosting football mega events was Saudi Arabia's investment in the Spanish Super Cup (Supercopa de España) that is held annually in Riyadh in a long-term deal. Between 2020 and 2026, with the exception of 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kingdom hosts a tournament with a "Final Four" format featuring La Liga's top clubs, such as Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Atlético de Madrid. (Reidy & Cons, 2025) LaLiga has a ten-year sponsorship agreement worth 20 million euros annually with Visit Saudi. Likewise, the contract to host the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia is valued at 138 million euros through 2028–2029. (Satish, Ginesta, & de San Eugenio Vela, 2024, p.46) These cup finals have been held in three different stadiums in the past 3 years. In 2022 and 2023, finals were held at the King Fahd International Stadium, in 2024 at the King Saud University Stadium, and in 2025 at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah. (Transfermarkt, n.d.) This

shows how they want to show to the millions of people watching the sold-out finals in Riyadh and Jeddah and showcase the prestige of European football and its heritage to the Gulf.

As mentioned above, the Italian Super Cup (Supercoppa Italiana) has followed a similar path to the Spanish one. They hosted the Cup finals from 2019 to 2022. From 2022 onwards, they switched to the “Final Four” format, and the final was held in Riyadh. (Transfermarkt, n.d.) According to Ettinger (2023, p.535), Saudi Arabia hosted the Italian Super Cup three times in five years for a total of \$24 million. As noted by Satish, Ginesta, and de San Eugenio Vela (2024, p.46), this reflects the broader and larger ambitions of the Kingdom in the organisation of European cup finals. Football mega-events like the Supercups of Spain, Italy, and Turkey are now held in Saudi Arabia. Table 2 shows the list of European Cup Finals held in Saudi Arabia.

Table 2 - List of European Cup Finals held in Saudi Arabia

Competition	Year hosted	Location
Supercoppa Italiana	2018,2019,2022,2023,2024	Jeddah, Riyadh
Supercopa de España	2020,2022,2023,2025	Jeddah, Riyadh
Turkish Super Cup	2023	cancelled

Source: Transfermarkt

The crowning achievement of this strategy came in late 2024, when it was awarded the hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup. (Olympics.com, 2024) This was followed by a strange decision from FIFA to shorten the application date. According to Brannagan and Reiche (2025, p.8), the 2034 World Cup submission window was abruptly accelerated by FIFA to a maximum of 25 days, which ultimately caused Football Australia to withdraw from the bidding process. They later discussed that this decision also seemed to favor and significantly benefit Saudi Arabia.

Brannagan and Reiche (2025,p.8) elaborate on their idea and state that for the 2034 World Cup, Saudi Arabia was the only bidder. Some observers interpret FIFA's decision to give three 2030 World Cup matches to South American nations as an intentional attempt to reduce the number of eligible bids in order to open the door for a Saudi 2034 tournament. (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025,p.8)

According to the Saudi bid book, the World Cup is meant to "support our national ambition to exceed 150 million visitors per year and help to generate 1.6 million jobs in the tourism sector by 2030" (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.21)

Saudi officials describe the tournament as a priority and a part of the Vision 2030 program.

"Hosting the FIFA World Cup 2034 is a national priority for Saudi Arabia, a comprehensive commitment that aligns perfectly with the country's long-term growth and innovation program known as Vision 2030." (Saudi Bid Book 2034,p.22)

Moreover, according to the Saudi bid book, it is a priority for the whole population and every government department. "Our bid, led by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF), is a priority for our country's leadership, every level of Government, and all 32 million Saudi citizens and residents. Saudi Arabia is in love with this beautiful game." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.13)

To achieve the requirements to host a World Cup, which are set up by FIFA, Saudi Arabia plans on building or renovating 15 stadiums, creating over 230,000 hotel rooms, with different styles and luxury levels, and building 134 training facilities across the country. (Saudi Bid Book 2034)

Saudi Arabia acknowledges its ambition to become a top-tier football nation and would like to contribute to the growth of football not only in the Gulf region but also in general.

"The FIFA World Cup 2034 will be a national celebration that supports our ambition to become a top-tier football nation as well as being a step forward for the sport across our region and for the global football ecosystem. Our goal is clear: to grow the game for all – for men and women, for boys and girls. We want to see more players, more coaches, and more spectators." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.18)

The hosting of the 2034 World Cup has caused a wave of criticism and mixed emotions from international actors, media outlets, and civil society groups. One of the most criticised and mentioned cases was the fact of hosting the FIFA World Cup, which was called a prime example of sportswashing. According to Brannagan and Reiche (2025, p.7), it depends on how the Kingdom will use the event. Whether the 2034 World Cup will be used as part of an effort to merely sportswash Saudi Arabia's image, or whether the country will use the tournament to align its human rights agenda with those of international standards. As Brannagan and Reiche (2025, p.7) note, human rights in Saudi Arabia currently lag behind

most international norms, with the prohibition of worker unionization and freedom of expression being particularly severe. Saudi authorities have been accused of effectively weaponizing the death penalty to silence political dissent after the state ordered the execution of 198 people.

Another layer of the criticism over the hosting of the World Cup and using it as a sportswashing strategy is the Kingdom's position on women in society and the Kingdom's funding of women's sports. As stated in the Saudi bid book :

"Saudi Arabia has made huge progress in developing interest and grassroots participation in football for women and girls. In the first year of the official program, more than 48,000 signed up – followed by more than 70,000 in the second year. At the same time, two elite leagues have been established as the foundations of the growing semi-professional game, a title sponsor has been secured for the SAFF Women's Premier League, and more than 1,000 elite players have been registered with SAFF. The establishment of 17 women's football academies since 2021 means that the development of future talent is promising." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.19)

According to Brannagan and Reiche (2025, p.8), even though the Government has worked to significantly improve women's sports and taken action to encourage women to participate in society, women's rights still lag far behind those of men. This has given rise to a number of complaints that Saudi funding for sports is just another example of sportswashing. In fact, the state's investment in women's sports has been referred to by Human Rights Watch as the newest sportswashing strategy, ignoring the fact that the Government continues to ban women's rights activists from travelling abroad.

The next area of criticism is regarding the rights of the LGBTQI+ community. According to Brannagan and Reiche (2025, p.8), "whilst the bid book regularly mentions the desire to 'combat discrimination' with respect of 'gender, disability, age, and other factors', it fails to detail how LGBTQI+ supporters will be welcomed and treated during the tournament"

Moreover, according to Amnesty International, the LGBTQI+ community could be discriminated against by imprisonment or fines. "LGBTQI+ rights are not legally recognized or protected in Saudi Arabia, even being labeled as 'extremist ideas'. The country's legal system prohibits LGBTQI+ relationships, public displays of affection and gender expression, with severe societal stigma, discrimination, and legal repercussions for LGBTQI+

individuals, including imprisonment, fines, or death penalty." (Amnesty International UK, 2025)

While hosting mega-events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix, the LIV Golf Tour, or the hosting of the 2034 FIFA World Cup has put Saudi Arabia on the global sports map. However, this strategy is just one piece of the Kingdom's broader strategy. Beyond global visibility and hosting of sports mega-events, the regime is also heavily investing in the domestic sports infrastructure, new leagues, and training initiatives. The following section explores how these investments, which are less visible internationally but significant strategically, are a central part of how Saudi Arabia wants to project its image of modernity, unity, and transformation from within.

4.3. Establishing new facilities, domestic leagues, and sports infrastructure

Following the investments into the hosting of sporting mega-events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix, the LIV Golf Tour, or the 2034 FIFA World Cup, Saudi Arabia has also focused on its infrastructure and facilities in order to build the backbone necessary to help achieve its sportswashing strategy and goals. This includes the development of elite sport facilities, the higher professional standard for its domestic leagues, and a considerable investment in building a huge sports infrastructure hub.

In this context, the Kingdom has launched multibillion-dollar developments, where the initiatives seek to grow the travel and entertainment industries in several popular tourist destinations in our nation, such as NEOM, Qiddiya, the Red Sea, and Diriyah. (Saudi Bid Book 2034,p.7). Simultaneously, the Saudi Pro League (SPL) has undergone a massive shift in recent years.

At the same time, the infrastructure for hosting the 2034 FIFA World Cup has started. This new project involves the building of new stadiums, training sites, accommodation, and transport, as mentioned in the previous part of the analysis. Each of these developments and investments holds a dual message. While domestically, they serve as a symbol of modernity and pride, on the international stage, they act as a display of how ambitious and capable Saudi Arabia is.

Taken together, these initiatives are not only a supportive infrastructure, but they are the main components of a well-thought-out and calculated campaign to better the name of the Kingdom on the international stage. The next section will analyze three cases of using this tactic for sportswashing purposes. Qiddiya as a flagship venue project and the establishment

of a new facility, The Saudi Pro League as the central piece of domestic league modernisation, and the infrastructure plan for the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

4.3.1 Qiddiya - New facilities as a projection of modernization

One of the most prominent examples of Saudi Arabia's investment in new facilities is Qiddiya, which will be a city of 376 square kilometers and is being developed outside of Riyadh. With its many sports arenas, music venues, water parks, and hospitality establishments, Qiddiya is intended to be positioned as a must-visit destination for entertainment. (Public Investment Fund, n.d.) Announced in 2017 and supported directly by the PIF, Qiddiya is intended to become the capital of entertainment, sports, and culture in Saudi Arabia. To achieve this, it will be the home to the Six Flags Qiddiya theme park and will be home to Falcon's Flight, the world's longest, tallest, and fastest coaster. In 2022, it was awarded to develop the biggest waterpark in the region, the Aquarabia Water Theme Park. It will also feature a Dragon Ball Theme park, the SpeedPark Track, and the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Stadium that will host all kinds of sports and cultural events, including the 2034 FIFA World Cup. Moreover, it will host the Mercedes AMG World of Performance, the Performing Arts Centre, and finally, the Gaming & Esports Precinct, which will be the world's first dedicated gaming and esports neighbourhood. (Public Investment Fund n.d.)

It stands as a symbolic and strategic attempt to demonstrate cultural transformation and futuristic development. In its core will be the planned Qiddiya Stadium, a 45,000-seat stadium. "It is designed as a physical representation of the vibrant relationship between people and water, energy and matter, with its design also evoking the ripple effect of a 'Mexican wave.'" (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.86) The Kingdom has plans for this venue, excluding the 2034 FIFA World Cup. According to the Saudi Bid Book 2034, "After the FIFA World Cup 2034, the stadium's flexible configuration means it will serve as a versatile and dynamic multi-purpose entertainment venue. The design allows for the removal of the upper tier for legacy purposes, leaving a 25,000-capacity venue. Curtains, partitions, and the removable football pitch will allow the facility to host leading esports events, exhibitions, concerts, and conferences, as well as major sports tournaments" (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.86)

Beyond football or cultural events, Qiddiya has become a centrepiece of Saudi Arabia's esports ambitions as part of Qiddiya City. In addition to gaming areas, the project will cover more than 500,000 square meters and will include 100,000 square meters of retail, dining, and

entertainment venues. Among these will be four world-class esports arenas with seating up to 73,000, and one of them will be equipped with the largest indoor LED screen in any esports arena and feature 5,300 seats, making it one of the three largest esports venues in the world. (Qiddiya Investment Company, 2023)

Moreover, Qiddiya is being framed as a new ecosystem for the global gaming industry. The plans include the hosting of 15 esports clubs that should foster community and growth on both a professional and personal level. It should also include regional headquarters for more than 30 of the biggest video game companies and gaming-themed apartments with retail zones. (Qiddiya Investment Company, 2023)

As stated by Abdullah Aldawood, Managing Director of Qiddiya Investment Company, "Qiddiya City is proud to be home to this innovative gaming and esports district, set to offer a unique, engaging, gamified experience to both its visitors and residents." (Qiddiya Investment Company, 2023)

As noted in (AlMarzooqi et al., 2022,p.1), hundreds of major Esports events from 2017 to 2021, with an annual viewership of 380 million, demonstrate the growing popularity of this new sports trend. The popularity of Esports, which primarily attracts younger players, is still growing on a global basis. One definition of eSport is the organized competitive play of different digital games. Electronic sports, sometimes referred to as e-sports or eSports, are competitions involving video games. The Esports players (eSP), also known as E-athletes, must become proficient in a variety of Esports domains, each with its own set of regulations and mechanics. Real-time strategy, first-person shooters, multiplayer online battlefield arenas, and player-versus-player are some of these genres. Real-time strategy, first-person shooters, multiplayer online battlefield arenas, and player-versus-player are some of these genres.

As with all the other cases mentioned above, this also does not go without critique. One of the main questions that arose from this project is that the building of all these new facilities will not end up as white elephants.

Robinson and Torvik (2005, as cited in Albalate, Bel, & Gragera, 2019,p.158) define a "White elephant" as an investment project that will result in negative social outcomes and inefficient redistribution of wealth "In the social sciences, a 'white elephant' has been defined as an investment project that results in negative social outcomes and inefficient redistribution of wealth. Politicians may be drawn to these projects, and the idea that their inefficiency makes them attractive politically is gaining increasing attention in the economics literature".

The question is whether these facilities will be used or will be just built for a few occasions yearly.

4.3.2 Domestic League development - The Saudi Pro League

The Saudi Pro League has become one of the most critical and vocal pieces of Saudi Arabia's domestic sport strategy. This strategy is characterized by significant investment, high-profile player signings, and extensive media attention. The domestic sport strategy is not isolated from the Kingdom's image-building efforts. Instead, they are integrated into its sportswashing campaign. According to Satish, Ginesta, and de San Eugenio Vela (2024, p.46), in the summer of 2023, a noteworthy development in Saudi football was fueled by Mohammed bin Salman's "Sports Clubs Investments and Privatization Project." As a result of this initiative, the Public Investment Fund now owns four SPL clubs: Al-Ahli, Al-Ittihad, Al-Hilal, and Al-Nassr. These clubs were able to obtain substantial funding from a sovereign wealth fund with assets close to US\$800 billion after the ownership changed. At the same time, the Royal Commission for Al-Ula, the Diriyah Gate Development Authority, the Saudi oil giant Aramco, and Neom, a massive futuristic mega-city project in the northwest, took control of four other clubs: Al-Ula FC, Al-Diriyah FC, Al Qadsia FC, and Al-Suqoor FC.

Due to the massive funding from the PIF, the clubs were able to sign the biggest stars of football. The aggressive strategy of paying huge sums for players and on their salaries has transformed the SPL into a league of the highest global prominence. This prominence has attracted players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Sadio Mané. In late 2022, Cristiano Ronaldo agreed to a two-and-a-half-year contract worth \$210 million USD with the Saudi Pro League's Al-Nassr, which was partially funded by a few Saudi government organizations. (Sheldon & Kay, 2023)

According to Satish, Ginesta, and de San Eugenio Vela (2024, p.44), the sports world was shaken by these actions, which captured everyone's attention.

Financially, the SPL clubs spent around €957 million only during the 2023 summer transfer window. According to Deloitte (2023), during the summer of 2023, SPL teams spent a total of 907 million US dollars and 956,88 million euros (Transfer Market) on player acquisitions. Now the second-highest league in the world in terms of spending, the English Premier League spent 1.39 billion US dollars on player acquisitions during the same period. (Satoshi, p.46) Table 3 below describes and shows the top 25 most valuable transfers to the Saudi Pro League since 2019, with names like Neymar Jr., Sadio Mané, N'Golo Kanté, or Moussa Diaby.

Table 3 - List of the 25 most valuable transfers to the Saudi Pro League since 2019

Player Name	Season	Team joined	Team departed	Market value (€m)	Transfer fee (€m)
Neymar Jr.	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Paris Saint-Germain	€75.00	€90.00
Jhon Durán	2024–25	Al-Nassr	Aston Villa	€40.00	€77.00
Moussa Diaby	2024–25	Al-Ittihad	Aston Villa	€35.00	€60.00
Malcom	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Zenit Saint Petersburg	€30.00	€60.00
Otávio	2023–24	Al-Nassr	FC Porto	€30.00	€60.00
Rúben Neves	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Wolverhampton	€40.00	€55.00
Aleksandar Mitrović	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Fulham	€28.00	€52.60
Galeno	2024–25	Al-Ahli	FC Porto	€27.00	€50.00
Fabinho	2023–24	Al-Ittihad	Liverpool	€35.00	€46.70
Ivan Toney	2024–25	Al-Ahli	Brentford	€28.00	€42.00
Marcos Leonardo	2024–25	Al-Hilal	Santos	€20.00	€40.00
Sergej Milinković-Savić	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Lazio	€40.00	€40.00
Mohamed Simakan	2024–25	Al-Nassr	RB Leipzig	€28.00	€35.00
Riyad Mahrez	2023–24	Al-Ahli	Manchester City	€35.00	€35.00
Sadio Mané	2023–24	Al-Nassr	Bayern Munich	€25.00	€30.00
Gabri Veiga	2023–24	Al-Ahli	Celta Vigo	€30.00	€30.00
Jota	2023–24	Al-Ittihad	Celtic	€28.00	€29.10
Moteb Al-Harbi	2024–25	Al-Hilal	Al-Shabab	€5.00	€28.95
Roger Ibañez	2023–24	Al-Ahli	Roma	€25.00	€28.50
Aymeric Laporte	2023–24	Al-Nassr	Manchester City	€25.00	€27.50
Allan Saint-Maximin	2023–24	Al-Ahli	Newcastle United	€27.00	€27.20
João Cancelo	2024–25	Al-Hilal	Manchester City	€18.00	€25.00
Seko Fofana	2023–24	Al-Nassr	RC Lens	€25.00	€25.00
Ângelo	2024–25	Al-Nassr	Chelsea	€10.00	€23.00
Kalidou Koulibaly	2023–24	Al-Hilal	Chelsea	€30.00	€23.00

Source: Transfermarkt

These moves were not purely for the upbringing of the level of football in Saudi Arabia or for athletic competitiveness, but also to establish the league as one of the top in the world and become a leading global competition, with a significant growth in broadcasting rights. (Saudi Bid Book 2034,p 19)

As mentioned in the Saudi Bid Book 2034 (p.19): "The SPL has seen strong growth and continues to do so. Average attendance for the top clubs is now around 20,000. There has been a more than threefold increase in broadcast revenue, with coverage now extending to more than 150 markets. And \$300 million in investments is the catalyst for ongoing development of private-sector clubs."

Despite the rapid rise, huge internalization of the league, and visibility gain, the SPL has drawn significant criticism from scholars, journalists, and civil rights groups. One of the main critiques is the criticism of players for ignoring human rights. A central concern is that the SPL aims to function as a genuine football initiative, but it instead functions as a form of sportswashing. As noted in Sønderholm (2024, p.7), many commentators think that moral criticism of these foreign players is appropriate. Such commentators frequently highlight the fact that foreign players willingly and knowingly participate in a public relations campaign that probably causes many people to forget Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses as justification for their moral condemnation of them. Millions of people worldwide will probably start to identify Saudi Arabia with professional football and its elite players rather than with a cruel authoritarian government with a poor record of upholding human rights. Foreign athletes should refrain from engaging in this unethical type of sportswashing. Smolak (2023) elaborates and states that this monstrous spending has caused new fatal flaws in the system of how football works. According to him, players opt for money over achievements.

"There is quite a bit of controversy within the soccer community surrounding the current actions of the Saudis. Critics argue that it is undermining the sport they have grown to love and cherish since it involves stealing away players when they still have so much to offer. Critics feel players are less motivated and have lost passion for playing for their club. Instead, these players are now just driven to make as much money as possible. Taking these world-class players out of Europe slowly diminishes the talent pool and big names on each team." (Smolak,2023)

Taken together, these domestic investments, the building of new stadiums, the rebranding and reinvention of the Saudi Pro League, and the construction of Mega projects and huge sport, training, and leisure facilities are forming one of the main components of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy. However, Saudi Arabia has not spent millions only on domestic matters; it has a bigger, global ambition. In order to understand that, we need to examine how it exports its image abroad through the huge sponsorship deals with some of the world's most visible sports properties.

4.4 International Sponsorship by State-affiliated organizations

The previous section explored how the state of Saudi Arabia has reshaped the domestic football scene through top-down investments and international celebrity acquisitions. Yet, Saudi Arabia's sportswashing ambitions are not reserved only for the domestic league. An equally strategic pillar is the approach that involves the aggressive sponsorship of visible, high-profile sports properties or teams.

While club takeovers or player contracts can offer the control of the domestic market, international sponsorship allows Saudi Arabia to project its presence across multiple media platforms, demographics, and sport disciplines. As Satish, Ginesta, and de San Eugenio Vela (2024, p.36) argue, Saudi Arabia has understood the importance of broadcast investment and sponsorship.

In this chapter, I will examine two of the most prominent actors in this sponsorship ecosystem. Aramco and Visit Saudi. Through these case studies, the thesis will show how visibility, branding, and soft power projection are leveraged and used as tools to secure the image set by Saudi Arabia.

4.4.1 Saudi Aramco

As the world's most valuable oil company, and the 6th largest company in the world it is the cornerstone of the Saudi economy. (CompaniesMarketCap, n.d.)

Currently, 70.5 thousand people work for Saudi Aramco. It is considered one of the world's most profitable businesses. During the fiscal year 2022, Saudi Aramco's total revenue was \$535 billion. Comparing Saudi Aramco to other significant oil and gas firms also reveals how dominant it is in the sector. Along with Exxon Mobile and BP, Saudi Aramco leads the world in daily crude oil production. (Statista, n.d.)

Saudi Aramco plays a crucial role not only in the financing of the 2030 Vision but also in supporting the Kingdom's reputation through sports. While most of its operations remain tied to the production of crude oil or fossil fuels, Aramco's aim is to rebrand itself as a leader in global innovation. (Aramco, n.d.) The daring decision to turn Saudi Aramco from a state-owned partnership into a partially public business was part of the modernization plan of Muhammad bin Salman, the crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. In accordance with Agenda 2030, the Saudi government intends to diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on oil earnings. The IPO of Saudi Aramco was a significant milestone in Saudi Arabia's economic and social reform. (Statista, n.d.)

As stated in the Saudi Arabia 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book, Aramco is listed as a top-tier sponsor in various events, such as the Dakar Rally, Diriyah Tennis Cup, Gamers8, Riyadh Season Tennis Cup 2023, or CONCACAF, with all of these events receiving significant world coverage. Only the Dakar Rally is watched by one billion viewers from 190 countries. (Toyota Gazoo Racing, 2021) Table 4 below shows all the sponsorships by Saudi Aramco.

Table 4 - List of all Aramco sponsored sport competitions

Sport	Competition
Football	FIFA Major Worldwide Partner (2024–2027)
Football	2026 FIFA World Cup
Motorsport	Formula 1-3 Global Partner
Motorsport	Aston Martin Aramco Cognizant F1 Team
Motorsport	Main Partner of the Dakar Rally
Cricket	International Cricket Council (ICC) Partnership
Cricket	Indian Cricket Council and Indian Premier League
Golf	Aramco Team Series (Ladies European Tour)
Esports	Formula 1 Esports Series
Esports	Gamers Without Borders and Gamers8

Source: (Human Rights Foundation, 2024)

However, these sponsorships in global sports have sparked an enormous backlash and criticism from climate experts, professional athletes, and civil rights organizations. One of the most potent criticisms has come from inside the sporting world. According to Levitt (2024), more than 100 women footballers have signed an open letter to FIFA, criticising the decision of FIFA to allow Aramco to sponsor the men's World Cup in 2026 and the Women's World

Cup in 2027. According to Saleh (2024), last year, early reports of FIFA's agreement with Aramco stated that it would be worth \$100 million a year until the 2034 World Cup, making it the most profitable commercial partnership in FIFA's history.

"They even created a new category, Major Worldwide Partner, giving Aramco exclusive rights in the energy category, including sponsorship of the 2026 World Cup and 2027 Women's World Cup," said Freddie Daley to PlaytheGame. (Brown, Auclair, Kerr, Kunti, & Menary, 2024)

In the public letter, the players stated that it's a disrespectful move against women and essentially a middle finger.

"A corporation that bears glaring responsibility for the climate crisis, owned by a state that criminalises LGBTQI+ individuals and systematically oppresses women, has no place sponsoring our beautiful game." (Athletes of the World, n.d.)

Climate activists have also criticized the involvement of Aramco in Formula, accusing the company of misleading environmental claims, where they are promoting its advanced and low-carbon fuels. At the same time, 99.99% of their production is fossil fuels. Frank Huisigh of Fossil Free Football states for Euronews Green (2024) that "Saudi Aramco poses a direct threat to a liveable planet... Big oil is deeply unpopular, so they spend hundreds of millions on PR, including associating itself with the sports we love."

4.4.2 Visit Saudi

Another central actor in Saudi Arabia's international sponsorship is Visit Saudi, the official tourism brand operated by the Ministry of Tourism. The reason I chose Visit Saudi is that, unlike Aramco's industrial branding, Visit Saudi is designed to amplify the Kingdom as a travel destination. (Bassam,2023) That means they will use sport as a tool to showcase the Kingdom as a modern and open travel destination. Visit Saudi became a sponsor across global competitions in football and motorsport. According to the 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book :

"Visit Saudi and Invest Saudi have also played a major role in sponsoring sporting events, both locally and abroad. Visit Saudi has forged partnerships with the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.221)

According to the AFC website, the collaboration will support the expansion of football and sports in the Kingdom and help Visit Saudi promote Saudi Arabia's expanding tourism offerings to Asian football fans worldwide. (Asian Football Confederation, 2023)

One of the most notable sponsorships is with La Liga, which will entail a number of activities, beginning with a high-profile launch event in Saudi Arabia. (Bassam,2023)
According to the La Liga website :

"La Liga and Visit Saudi have entered a partnership agreement with the aim of showcasing Saudi Arabia, the authentic home of Arabia, as the most exciting, year-round destination - where the passion for football intertwines with bridging connections among diverse cultures, ultimately bringing communities together" (LALIGA, 2023)

According to the website, the collaboration will showcase Saudi Arabia as a new, fast-growing destination and its role in the landscape of today's football.

"This collaboration will amplify Visit Saudi's work highlighting Saudi Arabia as the world's fastest-growing destination, its rich and captivating cultural heritage, its diverse landscapes, and its role as a pivotal hub for unprecedented sporting and cultural interactions in today's football landscape." (LALIGA, 2023)

Moreover, according to the 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book, Visit Saudi is also one of the main sponsors of the Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.219)
Along with agreements with the Indian Premier League (IPL) for Twenty20 cricket and a lucrative personal endorsement deal with Lionel Messi, the Saudi Tourism Authority was compelled to withdraw from a bid to sponsor the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup due to opposition from a number of stakeholders, including well-known athletes. (Bassam,2023)

The sponsorship of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup caused the most criticism towards the Visit Saudi sponsorship, despite the deal being close to being finalised. Similarly to the Aramco criticism, women footballers have spoken out about this sponsorship, putting pressure on the organizers, which eventually led to the deal being called off. Infantino, who is the president of FIFA, stated that he saw nothing wrong with accepting sponsorship from nations like Saudi Arabia as he announced a \$150 million prize fund for this year's Women's World Cup, a 300% increase from 2019. (Ingle, 2023)

The cases of Saudi Aramco and Visit Saudi demonstrate that international sport sponsorships are not just neutral commercial deals, but they function as instruments for Saudi Arabia and

its portrayal of its global image management strategy. Yet, sponsorship is only one part of this strategy. The following section will show how Saudi Arabia has turned into the owner of international sports clubs, platforms, or broadcasting rights.

4.5 International league and team investments

The cases of Saudi Aramco and Visit Saudi demonstrated that international sports sponsorships are not just neutral commercial deals, but they also function for Saudi Arabia, as well as how it portrays itself and its global image management strategy. However, sponsorship is only one part of this strategy. This section will show how Saudi Arabia has turned to ownership of sports clubs, esports platforms, and media rights for sports events as a strategic method to root itself in the global sports ecosystem. An analysis of three primary areas of Saudi international investments will be conducted to do so. Firstly, the ownership of a well-known historic football club, Newcastle United, as the leading case, the esports sector through Savvy Group and Gamers8, and finally, the purchase and control of sports broadcasting rights.

4.5.1 Club and Esport ownership : Newcastle United and Team Falcons

One of the most discussed sports investments made by Saudi Arabia is the purchase of Newcastle United Football Club. Finalized in October 2021, the deal was worth £300 million and the takeover of 80 % of the club's shares by the PIF, with the rest of the club still owned by British businessperson Amanda Staveley and the Reuben Brothers. (BBC Sport, 2021) The deal drew global attention not only due to the price of the agreement and the political symbolism and human rights concerns that Saudi Arabia has, but also because this was not the first time a state from the Gulf region has acquired a historic football club and invested huge sums into it. As Ettinger (2023, p.535) points out, other Gulf nations have also invested in European football: the United Arab Emirates' sovereign wealth fund bought Manchester City in 2008, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund owns Paris Saint-Germain, and the Dubai-based Emirates airline sponsors Real Madrid and Arsenal.

According to Crossley & Woolf (2024, p.313), while the Premier League has received "legally binding assurances" that there was a clear separation between the Saudi state and the PIF and that the Saudi state would not control the club, critics have disregarded the separation. Among one of them was Amnesty International, and its UK CEO, Sacha Deshmukh, stated:

"Despite assurances about a supposed separation from the Saudi state, ownership of St James' Park is now very much about image management for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his government" (Amnesty International UK, 2021)

The accusations of this move being an example of sportswashing, and the Telegraph called it the case of sportswashing :

"We should be well aware that this is about sportswashing – cleansing the image of a regime denounced for its human rights abuses, the war in Yemen and the brutal methods used for the suppression of political and social unrest inside the country, through a Premier League football club" (Edwards 2021,p.2 as cited in Crossley & Woolf, p.313)

Yet, the local fan base has responded quite the opposite way. A Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) survey has reported 93% of the supporters said they were happy with the purchasing process and that it would benefit their team, despite the fact, that 99% of fans has acknowledged the the fact, that the process has lacked transparency (Yuceruk, p.128-129) See Jones, I., Adams, A., & Mayoh, J. (2024) for more information regarding the Newcastle takeover.

Alongside traditional sports, Saudi Arabia has very aggressively expanded into the field of esports. While I discussed Qiddiya and esports in an earlier part of the analysis, here I would like to talk about Team Falcons. The expansion of Saudi Arabia into esports is no surprise, as the Kingdom is trying to leverage its massive youth population and the digital targets set in the Vision 2030 strategy. A key player in this strategy is Team Falcons. As mentioned earlier (AlMarzooqi et al., 2022,p.1), Esports, which primarily draws younger players, is becoming more and more popular worldwide. Team Falcons is one of Saudi Arabia's top professional esports organizations. According to EA SPORTS (n.d.), there are currently 90 players, 13 content producers, and 25 managers spread across various regions and games. Similarly to Newcastle United, funded by the PIF, the team has risen to regional dominance and, through international tournaments, gained media visibility, often paying vast amounts of money to buy out a whole team. (See PHY CS2 - The pay to lose esports team for more information about the Team Falcons' history and strategy.)

As noted in SearchParty (2023), 70% of the Kingdom's population is under the age of 35, and out of those, 23% are unemployed. Chadwick noted that this could be an internal security issue, as the majority of the protesters during the Arab Spring were 26 years old, and young people could be demanding of the ruling family. Zidan elaborates and states that you have to

do something with them, and feeding them entertainment is one of the main ways to take care of the issue. Later on, he states that a kid growing up in Saudi Arabia loves the regime for this.

According to Zidan (2022), in 2022, Saudi Arabia launched the Savvy Games Group, owned by PIF, with plans to invest \$37.8 million into esports and gaming infrastructure. The Saudi sovereign wealth fund invested \$3 billion in significant gaming companies in 2020 and purchased the Japanese company SNK. Over the ensuing years, these investments increased in pace. A Saudi sovereign wealth fund-funded business paid \$1.05 billion in January 2022 to acquire Sweden-based ESL Gaming. Additionally, it merged the two businesses after paying \$500 million to acquire eSports tournament organizer FACEIT. A few weeks later, Saudi Arabia began a billion-dollar project to build the nation's digital entertainment infrastructure, which included facilities for competition arenas and game studios.

Moreover, to help with the Vision 2030 targets, the National Gaming and Esports Strategy was created. That aims to make Saudi Arabia the global hub for the gaming and esports sector by 2030. (Elsborg, 2022) Esports has emerged not only as a commercial bet but is purposely targeting the young generation in order to gain their liking, and that puts Saudi Arabia into the position of a high-tech, forward-looking digital society with narratives such as prestige or innovation. Together with the Newcastle purchase and the Esports investments, showcase how a sports team ownership operates not only as a financial venture or investment but also as a tool of implanted influence.

4.5.2 Media and broadcast rights

A less visible but a critical and significant dimension of the Kingdom's sports investment strategy is in the controlling and owning of sports broadcasting and media rights in Saudi Arabia. At the center of this strategy are two dominant players, the Saudi Sports Company (SSC) and the MBC Group. Both of these companies work as the leading distributors of sports content that is owned and hosted by Saudi Arabia. According to the 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book :

"Saudi Sports Company (SSC) focuses solely on serving the huge demand for sports media content within Saudi Arabia. SSC holds the broadcast rights in the country for the Saudi Pro League, SAFF Women's Premier League, SAFF Women's Cup, Saudi national team matches, the FIFA Club World Cup, the AFC Champions League, and the Spanish Super Cup." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.223)

The MBC Group, meanwhile, manages the Shahid streaming platform, which reaches its audience in the Middle East and North Africa. They hold the streaming rights to the Saudi Pro League as well as the AFC Champions League in Asia. Besides football, they have the rights to broadcast Formula 1 and WWE wrestling. (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.223)

Moreover, the Kingdom's media ambitions are more than expansive. As stated in the 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book (p.222), the SPL has secured broadcast agreements in over 150 countries, and the League's 2023–2024 season has seen a more than threefold increase in broadcast revenue. Growth is anticipated to continue after 2025.

This expansion, however, is not only commercial. The media law in Saudi Arabia strengthens and requires central control.

"The Audiovisual Media Law (Royal Decree No. M/33 of 25/03/1439) and its regulations govern all audiovisual media activities in Saudi Arabia, including those via satellite, cable, digital, terrestrial, radio, and television." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.223)

The Audiovisual Media Law Mandates that all broadcast and visual content must comply with the Saudi media policy and must be licensed by the The General Authority of Media Regulation (Gmedia) "Any entity wishing to broadcast audio or visual media to audiences within Saudi Arabia must first obtain a license from Gmedia. These licenses are allocated with certain requirements, including that broadcasters must provide Gmedia with any relevant information about broadcasting, production, or distribution of media content, if requested by the agency." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.223-224)

This system is ensuring regulation and control over both domestic and international messaging that is tied to sports content. In effect, Saudi Arabia is not only buying clubs or hosting sports events; it wants to shape how sports events and sports are seen, heard, and understood by the public.

Together, these ownership strategies of club ownership, esports platforms, and media rights demonstrate how Saudi Arabia wants to leave a footprint in the core of global sports. However, beyond the team sponsorship and infrastructure lies a very powerful tool of influence, the athletes themselves. This final section of the analysis will examine how global celebrities, influencers, and sports icons have become one of the key players in the Kingdom's soft power and image management project.

4.6 Athlete and celebrity engagement

While state investments in clubs, esports platforms, or media infrastructure, perhaps there is a tool that is even more effective and visible to the public, and that is the use of world-famous athletes and celebrities to brand the country and deal with its reputation with a solid management strategy. These individuals are not only players or performers, but their presence, social media accounts, and personalities are all used in order to brand Saudi Arabia as an ambitious and modern country.

This section explores the transfer of Cristiano Ronaldo, whose unprecedented contract with Al-Nassr has marked a turning point for the SPL and for the visibility and recognition in Saudi football. Moreover, Neymar and Benzema's transfers continued the arrival of celebrities and well-known footballers into the league. In this example, the thesis will analyze how celebrity branding merges and helps national branding and how these influencers and sportspeople are strategically used to soften or distract from the state's global image.

4.6.1 Cristiano Ronaldo and the power of player presence

The arrival of Cristiano Ronaldo to Saudi Arabia was shocking and unheard of. His transfer not only marked the highest-profile and most well-known sportsman in the country's history, but also created a wave of huge global visibility for the SPL and Saudi Arabia as such. According to Chillingworth (2025), Cristiano Ronaldo is the most followed individual on Instagram, with a total of more than 653 million followers, ahead of Lionel Messi, who has 505 million followers. As stated by Floyd (2022) 37-year-old Ronaldo is one of the greatest football players to have won the Ballon d'Or five times. Cristiano Ronaldo joined the Saudi Arabian team Al-Nassr on Friday, December 29th, marking a significant milestone for Saudi Arabian football. Cristiano Ronaldo and the Saudi Football League's Al Nassr signed a \$75 million annual contract, with the possibility of reaching \$200–260 million through club promotions and commercial deals. Ronaldo is now the highest-paid football player in the world as a result.

Empirical data created the so-called "Ronaldo effect". Schreyer & Singleton (2025), in their paper, found out that :

"Ronaldo alone increased stadium attendance demand, even before the influx of further stars in the summer of 2023. On average, Ronaldo filled an additional 20% of the seats in his home

team's stadium when he played, 15% in the stadiums he visited, and 3% where he did not even play." (Schreyer & Singleton, 2025, p.260)

However, this effect was not limited only to the stadiums. The Al-Nassr Instagram page has seen a notable surge in followers since Ronaldo signed, going from about 853,000 (Wright,2023) to 28 million as of May 2025. (Al-Nassr FC, 2024) An analysis made by Young (2024,p.22) on the club's announcement post on Instagram has noted the presence of Ronaldo's presence and national branding objectives. "Ronaldo's signing is portrayed as inspirational beyond Al Nassr Football Club (FC), aligning with a nation branding strategy."

A closer examination of the Al-Nassr Instagram feed shows that Ronaldo is featured prominently in a significant percentage of the club's posts following the acquisition, with 29 out of 37 posts occurring immediately following the signing in January 2023. (Wright,2023)

The player's strategic placement as the primary focus of Al-Nassr's branding initiatives, acting as a means of increasing the club's appeal and visibility on a national and international level, is highlighted by the preponderance of Ronaldo-related content. (Young, 2024,p.23)

However, what is more important is that Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer has set a precedent. As (Schreyer & Singleton, 2025,p.261) observed :

"Taking a broader policy perspective, attracting Ronaldo may have laid the groundwork for subsequent player moves, which could elevate the SPL's future competitiveness, not least by motivating local talent in the stands to pursue a football career. The Ronaldo signing, and subsequent player moves, could attract international tourists and foreign investments to the country, help market the TV product abroad, and legitimize KSA's other foreign sports investments, including the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United FC."

Indeed, a few months later, Saudi clubs managed to sign the stars of Neymar, Benzema, Mané, Mahrez, or Kanté. See Table 3 (Chapter 4.3.2) for the list of the most well-known players joining the SPL.

These huge moves have been criticised by Amnesty International, as the Kingdom will use its presence to promote the country and distract from its negative human rights record.

"Al-Nassr's signing of Cristiano Ronaldo fits into a wider pattern of sportswashing in Saudi Arabia. It is highly likely that the Saudi authorities will promote Ronaldo's presence in the country as a means of distracting from the country's appalling human rights record. Instead of

offering uncritical praise of Saudi Arabia, Ronaldo should use his considerable public platform to draw attention to human rights issues in the country." (Amnesty International, 2023)

Iqbal (2023) was even more straightforward and says it is really sad to see already wealthy players ignoring human rights records and thinking just about money.

"It is depressing to see such high-profile players - already absurdly wealthy - sell themselves and their legacy to the Saudis. Do they even bother to ask why they are being offered this kind of money to play in an irrelevant football league?"

Meanwhile these high calibre players bring millions of views to the SPL, some of the signings have ended prematurely and with a bad reputation. According to Watach (2024), as of 2024, already six prominent names have left Saudi Arabia in 2024, due to being unhappy in the Kingdom. Among these were Allan Saint-Maximin, Jordan Henderson, and David Ospina.

Another interesting case is Kylian Mbappé, who was linked to join Al-Hilal after his contract with Paris Saint-Germain ended. The deal was reportedly for \$330 million as a transfer fee to PSG and another \$770 million in wages to Mbappé in a year. Despite this massive contract, Kylian Mbappé declined and chose to join Real Madrid instead. (Miller, 2023)

This chapter has presented the analysis that demonstrated the scale, variety, and sophistication of the sportswashing strategy of Saudi Arabia. From the hosting of global mega-events and the construction of massive domestic infrastructure projects to the sponsorship of elite competitions, acquisition of clubs, esports brands, and broadcasting rights to the strategic use of global celebrities, Saudi Arabia has built a very comprehensive agenda to reshape its image in the world.

These efforts, however, are not isolated. Instead, they are coordinated under the umbrella of the Vision 2030 project, a national strategy that frames sport along with other areas not only as a domestic development goal but also as the main engine for the global image transformation of the Kingdom. The goal is not just to distract from the abuse of human rights or authoritarian governance, but also to actively rebrand the country as a modern and globally integrated country.

However, this strategy has not gone without criticism and discussion. As the Kingdom invests billions into new stadiums, infrastructure, sponsorship, or star players, the criticism has not

only not disappeared, but by every one of the tactics used in the analysis above, it just strengthened. This has been pointed out by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as professional athletes, scholars, and journalists, and they have been calling for the ethical implications of these investments. However, the more Saudi Arabia tries to control and shift its image through sports with these huge multi-billion deals, the more it stirs the waters of the international community, and is inviting criticism. Moreover, it also puts the topics of abysmal human rights, death penalties, censorship, inequality, or corruption under the spotlight, which could be contradictory to what they try to achieve.

This chapter has provided the empirical foundation to understand how Saudi Arabia uses and wants to achieve its ambitions through sports. In the next chapter, the thesis will move from description to analysis. Using the theoretical foundations based on chapter 2, chapter 5 will evaluate the coherence, effectiveness, and limitations of the Kingdom's sportswashing strategy through soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding, and discuss whether the visibility claimed by Saudi Arabia really translates into influence.

4.5 Discussion

The previous chapter has introduced and provided the empirical analysis of Saudi Arabia and its sportswashing strategy across five distinct domains: hosting of mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities, sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing into international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights and finally, engaging and using well renowned athletes. These strategies have been used and shown together, forming a coordinated attempt to rebrand Saudi Arabia as a modern and open country, despite its ongoing controversies regarding authoritarianism, corruption, or human rights.

This chapter will move from empirical description to theoretical interpretation. It applies three key analytical lenses used in the theoretical framework, soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding, in order to evaluate how Saudi Arabia used sport function in terms of international image management and audience targeting. The aim is not only to assess what Saudi Arabia did and is doing, but also to ask whether it works or is it persuasive?

These questions are fundamental, given the paradoxes exposed in Chapter 4. The more Saudi Arabia spends and tries to reshape its image, the more global attention is drawn to the very issues they are trying to sportswash, such as the criminalization of the LGBTQI+ community

or systematic gender inequality. This raises the possibility that sportswashing is self-defeating. In the next section, the chapter will focus on each of the three theoretical frameworks and analyse the strengths and limitations of the sportswashing efforts done by Saudi Arabia, before offering a final assessment of the overall effectiveness of the strategy.

4.5.1 Soft power and Saudi Arabia's sports washing strategy

As stated in Chapter 2, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power is focused on the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It rests on the nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies, but only when those elements are considered legitimate and admirable. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the five sportswashing strategies that the thesis detailed in Chapter 4 can all be interpreted as attempts to convert the gained visibility into soft power.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, soft power is used primarily through an organized global image. A global image that emphasizes modernity, openness, and reform. Under the Vision 2030 project, the Kingdom has systematically turned to sport, mainly on football, golf, motorsport, or the use of high-profile celebrities as instruments to help with the Kingdom's global image rebranding and projection.

Saudi Arabia's most visible soft power success has come from its strategic use of sport and entertainment. Among these are the signing of Cristiano Ronaldo by Al-Nassr in 2023, which drew a huge global media reputation. As mentioned earlier, a study by Schreyer & Singleton (2025) conceptualized the "Ronaldo effect", which has created not only a massive wave of new fans and recognition on social media, but also increased domestic match attendance by 20%.

Saudi Arabia also invested in hosting the esports tournament Gamers8, one of the world's largest esports festivals. These investments are not only popular among the young generation but also serve to showcase Saudi Arabia as a forward-looking and desirable country. Czornik (2024, p.196) observes that "MBS, who is the face of these transfers and sporting events, uses sportswashing to create his image as a modern ruler who understands the needs of his society and works to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position and prestige on a global scale."

This strengthens Nye's idea that attraction is derived not only from culture but also from policies and political values, especially when they appear as reformist or progressive.

However, not all elements of Saudi Arabia's strategy gained admiration; quite the contrary. As I pointed out in the analysis above, every investment and use of sport has sparked some form of criticism, bigger or smaller. These contradictions raise critical questions about the authenticity of the reforms being marketed. External perception in IR relies on credibility, and when sport campaigns and the use of sport are accompanied by repression, corruption, or censorship, the appeal of the message disappears. As Nye stated (2008), "When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."

Scholars, however, argue that soft power has not been the primary goal of the Kingdom. Ettinger (2023, p.533) argues that "For one, Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy strategy is primarily about economic and geopolitical power, with soft power a secondary consideration."

Czornik (2024, p.196) supports this and adds that significant Saudi sport investments have been an effective soft power tool.

"...for at least a decade, Saudi major investments in sports have been an effective soft power tool used by the authorities in Riyadh to change the perception of the Kingdom on the international stage. These investments are intended to symbolize the modernization, transformation and advancement of the country, attract foreign investors from other sectors and numerous tourists, and serve as an instrument for gaining approval and legitimacy from the Saudi Society, particularly the young people under the age of 30, who make up the majority of the population."

This implies that while soft power may be a byproduct of these investments, it may not have to be the primary goal. I can also see the resemblance to sportswashing. The country does not have to aim to sportswash, host mega-events, or pay millions to athletes; it just ends up doing it. In order to rebrand and shift the oil-based economy, they invest billions into every possible business venture, alongside sports and their economy. Sports, especially football, have billions of fans worldwide, and it is a very well-thought-out and strategic way to use it in order to try to make a better name for your country. In sum, Saudi Arabia has proven that it is effective at deploying symbolic language and actions that can be considered soft power. However, its credibility remains under close observation. The global audience may listen and observe, but they do not have to be persuaded by the attempts of the Kingdom.

4.5.2 Public diplomacy and Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy

In the context of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy, public diplomacy can be the method and the message simultaneously. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is closely related to soft power. Soft power is a valuable instrument for determining a nation's attractiveness, but public diplomacy is the strategic process through which this appeal is utilized and expressed globally. This means that public diplomacy involves how a state communicates its strategies with the foreign public to build credibility and legitimacy for its actions. This aligns with Alkatheeri & Khan's (2019, p.30) statement that public diplomacy is essential to international relations because it creates a dialogue with the world community to either inspire or educate them. Public diplomacy serves to represent a particular country to the global public and to defend and explain governmental policies. Alkatheeri & Khan distinguish that Saudi Arabia is using different types of public diplomacy, together with its hard and soft power.

"For this, Saudi Arabia has implemented several methods of public diplomacy, such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchange programs and international broadcasting. The Kingdom has been able to advance its foreign policy interests as it has the unique approach of using both hard and soft powers. This approach is directly linked to Saudi Arabia being the home of the Islamic religion and one of the wealthiest nations in the world due to its huge oil reserves." (Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019, p.30)

Another way Saudi Arabia can implement its public diplomacy is through sport. The use of sport reflects a deliberate attempt to shift global perception. Hosting and creating high-profile events such as the LIV Golf series or the Gamers8 tournaments, or buying international broadcasting rights for sports competitions and events through SSC and MBC Group, are not only about presenting the event. They are built in a way that Saudi Arabia can communicate through them about the narrative of openness, reform, or ambition, although the reality can be quite the opposite. (Ettinger, 2023, p.533) notes that "sports diplomacy enlists a wider range of actors and, especially, public audiences on the international stage." Stuart (As cited in Ettinger,2023, p.533) characterizes the phenomenon as the use of sports figures and events to engage, inform, and create a favorable image among foreign publics and organizations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government's foreign policy goal.

A good example could be the Kingdom's investment in its sport ambassadors. Among them were Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. The Kingdom has chosen the two most prominent

names in football in the last decade to help them spread the good word about Saudi Arabia and to communicate with their fans all around the world. And it is necessary to state that both these players have been under a lot of criticism from journalists, human rights organizations, and their own fans. The Visit Saudi campaign involving Messi has collapsed due to the backlash tied to his role as a UN ambassador for children. This was seen as a direct contradiction with the Saudi Kingdom's human rights record. This aligns with Young's (2024, p.41) conclusion that "Saudi Arabia's investments in sports draw attention to human rights rather than diverting it, challenging the concept of sportswashing."

Public diplomacy also involves understanding who the intended audience is. Saudi Arabia is targeting multiple audiences, such as western sport fans that are drawn in through global icons or the hosting of elite tournaments, or the domestic youth population, to whom the government not only delivers entertainment from most of the sports fields, but also builds infrastructure and holds tournaments. As stated by Zidan, a kid growing up in Saudi Arabia loves the regime and the Crown Prince for this, as the analysis showed earlier, for example, the signing of Ronaldo and the overall investment into the SPL has two layers, a domestic one and an international one. It is projected that on the domestic level, it will rally support and on the global level, it will project power abroad.

However, Young(2024, p.41) observed that Saudi Arabia's attempts to use sport and potentially change the perception of the country have not really been successful.

"While sports diplomacy initiatives have demonstrated a limited potential in altering perceptions, particularly in Europe where there is a more mixed sentiment, the current impact on Western perceptions overall, particularly in the United States, has not been as pronounced as initially anticipated."

Even with its efforts to modernize the country, they have to find a balance between upholding its religious and cultural traditions and pursuing its public diplomacy objectives. (Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019, p.31) This fact can undermine the messaging of the Kingdom. While esports, hosting events, or celebrity athletes suggest and promote the liberalization of the regime, their human rights records, the position of women, or corruption will dominate the global news headlines. The result is that Saudi Arabia is in a very unstable position, as it can invest any amount of money to host a tournament and invite all people, but in fact sentencing the members of the LGBTQI+ community to jail.

Sports diplomacy is ultimately about investing in the future promise of persuasive power in world politics. True, it can be aimed at sportswashing in a public relations sense. (Stuart, as cited in Ettinger,2023, p.533)

4.5.3 Nation branding and Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy

Nation branding is the strategic process of how the country creates and communicates its desired image to international audiences. As defined in chapter 2, nation branding encompasses a country's entire international image, including its political, economic, and cultural aspects. It is not only about marketing but also about creating unity between the projected identity and the actual policy. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the ambition to rebrand the country has been explicitly admitted and articulated through Vision 2030.

As stated in the official Vision 2030 documents, "Vision 2030 is a bold and exciting blueprint that draws upon Saudi Arabia's rich history, heritage, culture, strategic location, and economic strength." The branding ambition of the Kingdom is meant to be inclusive and global: "We will welcome qualified individuals from all over the world and will respect those who have come to join our journey and our success." (Saudi Bid Book 2034,p.8)

A powerful symbol of this branding effort is Qiddiya, a 376 square kilometer sports and entertainment city outside of Riyadh. Marked as the future capital of entertainment, sports, and arts, Qiddiya is designed to host a range of facilities, from motorsport tracks and football stadiums to theme parks or cultural venues. Qiddiya is not just infrastructure; it is a narrative of the physical embodiment of modernity, ambition, and innovation. It supports the Vision 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia being a futuristic, dynamic, open, and forward-looking country.

The country's rebranding with the use of sports and entertainment is further showcased by hosting mega-events such as the 2034 FIFA World Cup, Formula 1 Grand Prix, and the LIV Golf Tour. Satish, Ginesta, and de San Eugenio Vela (2024, p.31) observed that "Saudi Arabia has decided to embark on a nation branding strategy through investing in sports, especially in football, and to show the world they are the forerunners of the global football landscape as part of Saudi Vision 2030."

But for nation branding to succeed, it must deliver consistency and not only visibility, as with the previous theoretical interpretation. If the country is branding itself as an open and tolerant one, but the reality is the opposite, it will cause more damage than success. It is evident in the discussed examples, while Qiddiya or NEOM project the desired image of a futuristic, open

and inclusive image, controversies such as the Aramco sponsorship of the women's World Cup expose the gaps between the desired and the real. These inconsistencies are then weakening the branding attempts and risk undermining the trust of the audience.

Snow & Cull (2020, p.385) argue that "The Saudi Arabia case study clearly illustrates that the branding of countries with an existing image problem can rapidly and severely damage achievements of years of carefully planned branding efforts if they get caught in the global public eye."

Despite the setbacks, Saudi Arabia continues to invest heavily in the rebranding of the Kingdom and in its brand building. According to Snow & Cull (2020, p.380), the country rose to number 21 in the Brand Finance's national brand index by 2018. This represents early gains from the Vision 2030 reforms. The 2034 FIFA World Cup bid book supports this optimism: "Vision 2030 has already brought historic achievements, while future plans underpin the nation's continued success in making the ambitions of Vision 2030 a reality." (Saudi Bid Book 2034, p.8)

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia's nation branding through sport and mega-projects like Qiddiya is both vulnerable and ambitious. It shows the calculated strategy of the Kingdom to use the global reach and language of sport and entertainment to rebrand it. However, successfully rebranding an image depends not only on investment and infrastructure but also on credibility.

4.5.4 Effectiveness and contradictions

Saudi Arabia's use of sport to carry out a new national brand for the Kingdom has generated an unprecedented wave of global attention. However, this attention does not automatically mean admiration. By investing across five different domains, the Kingdom has created a sophisticated image management strategy. The five domains are hosting sports mega-events, establishing new sports infrastructure and facilities, sponsoring elite competitions and teams, acquiring clubs and esports platforms, and using celebrity endorsement. However, the effectiveness of this strategy remains deeply questioned. In most cases, the bigger visibility has in fact not led to a bigger legitimacy, but to more criticism.

The most effective is the visibility and reach gained. The signing of Ronaldo in 2023 generated the "Ronaldo effect", leading to a 20% increase in domestic league match attendance and the subsequent signings of football stars such as Neymar or Benzema.

Al-Nassr's Instagram has skyrocketed from under a million to 28 million followers in the span of 2 years since Ronaldo's signing.

Another example could be the 80% stake that the PIF has bought in the Premier League club Newcastle United. It not only immediately expanded the soft power reach to the UK and Europe, but despite the criticism of the move, 93% of local fans supported the takeover. This shows a vast and strong domestic legitimization.

Hosting Gamers8, one of the biggest esports festivals, Saudi Arabia is positioned as a youth-focused and tech-dominant nation. Together with the building of Qiddiya and NEOM, the esports sector provides visibility with domestic youth, as 70% of the population is under the age of 35, or international gaming audiences.

Despite the massive criticism of the LIV Golf League regarding the huge payouts and signing bonuses, and the ban from the PGA to its players for participating in the LIV League, the pressure has switched to the favour of Saudi Arabia, as they reached a deal worth around 1.3 billion to merge the two organizations.

The Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix has been held annually since 2021, with a steadily increasing number of viewers that averaged around 1.5 million in 2025. The crown jewel of the Saudi Arabian nation branding is the hosting of the 2034 FIFA World Cup, which will tie the Saudi regime to elite European football traditions and give the opportunity to showcase the country on the biggest stage, as the World Cup is the most watched event every year it is held.

Lastly, one of the most successful and visible investments is the branding of Saudi Tourism. Strategic deals with La Liga, AFC, or CAF extend Saudi branding across Africa, Asia, and Europe. While Visit Saudi's attempt to sponsor the 2023 Women's World Cup has failed due to international criticism, Visit Saudi's ongoing partnerships have helped position the Kingdom as a desirable destination for tourism.

4.5.5 Contradictions and criticism

Despite the gains in visibility and global reach, these positives for Saudi Arabia are consistently overlooked and undercut by narrative contradictions. While Saudi Arabia presents itself as an open country to everyone, the domestic policies paint a different picture. Among the leading contradictions are Women's rights and LGBTQI+ oppression. The contradictions became very apparent during the Visit Saudi sponsorship of the 2023 FIFA

Women's World Cup, which led to the collapse after the massive criticism from the international community. Another instance is the Aramco sponsorship of the next World Cup cycle, which has been addressed and signed to FIFA by more than 100 professional female football players, who called it a betrayal of the tournament's values and the middle finger to women.

The next layer is the backlash of high-profile athletes who sign deals in the SPL. Among them are Jordan Henderson, who left Al-Ettifaq in 2023 just a few months after joining due to discomfort and backlash from fans and media. Despite a staggering \$700 million offer for a yearly contract for Kylian Mbappé, the French superstar declined the offer, highlighting that not everyone and all forms of attraction can be bought.

Global NGOs and civil society groups such as Amnesty International or the Human Rights Watch consistently label the Saudi investments as sportswashing. The purchase of Newcastle United has been described as an image management tool for MBS and not a footballing investment.

These lead to the core of the issue. Visibility does not equal legitimacy. Saudi Arabia has succeeded in getting into the roots of global sporting consciousness, but in doing so, it has also drawn renewed attention to the very controversies and issues it tries to sportswash, such as the human rights abuses and the Khashoggi assassination. As mentioned earlier, while Saudi Arabia tries to sportswash its image, more attention will be drawn to its actions. Moreover, the more types of sportswashing they use, the more this trend will be happening, as people will point out that they not only paid for Ronaldo's insane wage, but also built new cities and had controversial sponsorships. The Kingdom's strategy may be self-destructive or self-defeating with each new sponsorship, celebrity signing, or stadium built. All of these could reignite the debate over whether sport is being used as a tool for autocratic regimes to hide the regime's policies. As Young (2024, p.41) puts it: "Saudi Arabia's investments in sports draw attention to human rights rather than diverting it, challenging the concept of sportswashing."

4.5.6 Evaluating the sportswashing outcomes

Saudi Arabia's sportswashing campaign is arguably one of the most ambitious and successful of the 21st century. Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy, as examined through the lenses of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding, reveals one of the most expensive and ambitious image management campaigns in the modern era. By investing billions across five

key domains: hosting of mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities, sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing into international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights and finally, engaging and using well renowned athletes, the Kingdom has attempted to rebrand its global reputation. But while the scale of the campaign is undeniable, the success is questioned.

From a soft power perspective, Saudi Arabia has achieved exceptional visibility and global attention. Investments like the signing of Ronaldo or the LIV Golf Tour generated short-term attention and fan engagement, but these achievements do not necessarily translate into admiration or alignment with Saudi values; quite the contrary. As Nye notes, credibility is key for soft power to be effective, and this is precisely where Saudi Arabia's sportswashing efforts fail. The difference between a reformist and open image and authoritarian practices can be the dealbreaker for the trust needed for persuasion.

In terms of public diplomacy, Saudi Arabia is using sports as a platform to communicate with global audiences through events, athletes, or media. However, the Kingdom's actions prioritize control over engagement. Backlash to the Messi tourism campaign or the Aramco FIFA sponsorship showcases the limits of this engagement. Rather than silencing critics, these campaigns have boosted the criticism.

Through nation branding, the Saudi Kingdom has sought to rebrand itself as a young, dynamic, and future-oriented country. Projects like Qiddiya, NEOM, and the transformation of the SPL are designed to be the new symbols of this new brand. The effectiveness of branding, however, depends on credibility. When the values promoted through sport clash with the reality of the regime, the brand becomes vulnerable.

What emerges from this analysis is a paradox: the more it builds an image of openness and the more it invests into different types of sport events or sponsorships, the more criticism and scrutiny it invites. Every high-profile event or athlete puts the country under a bigger spotlight, and that way it exposes the issues rather than sweeping them. This results in a fragile legitimacy that is supported by investment but undermined by contradiction. Effectively, Saudi Arabia has bought visibility and maybe partial credibility; it still has a long road to go if it wants to achieve the aims of its projects and the full potential of sports.

This, however, does not mean that the strategy has failed in its entirety. In regions like Africa or Southeast Asia, where Saudi Arabia has sponsorship deals through the CAF and AFC, the messaging of its modernization and investment could be better received. Domestically,

sportswashing could unify the younger generation by giving them entertainment, and that way, guaranteeing loyalty or system stability.

SearchParty (2023) asked Simon Chadwick whether he thinks the actions of Saudi Arabia are sportswashing. He answered that it depends on where you are sitting in the world. If you are in Scandinavia and you look at this, yes, absolutely, it is sportswashing. However, the people in the Gulf region will look at people who criticise them and claim that they are only investing in sports, the same way as any other country in the world. This gives another layer to the effectiveness of sportswashing, as it is also dependent on the audience.

In conclusion, sport and its ecosystem have proven to be a valuable and powerful tool for the Kingdom. But without a genuine reform and alignment between the message and reality, the Kingdom's sportswashing strategy is risking becoming a very expensive tool. A tool that has been seen by all, but believed by few.

CONCLUSION

Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a significant transformation through different social and economic reforms. These reforms aim to diversify the very oil-dependent economy of the Kingdom and alter the image of the country abroad. Sport has been identified as one of the key strategic instruments that will help the Kingdom present the country as modern and open, together with an appealing image aimed at Western audiences. This thesis has explored how Saudi Arabia uses sportswashing as a deliberate soft power strategy to shape and rebrand its international image and distract from criticism regarding its human rights records or corruption, especially in the Western context. The thesis is based on three theoretical bases of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding. These concepts collectively form the analytical lens that was used to analyse Saudi Arabia's sportswashing activities. The central theoretical argument was that the massive investments in sports are not only a symbol of engagement but also a strategic tool that can be used by authoritarian regimes in order to attract international legitimacy and reshape their global image, avoiding political reform. The thesis adopts a qualitative single case study approach focused on Saudi Arabia as an illustrative case of sportswashing. To meet the research objectives, the study analyzed the data sources that included primary documents such as the Vision 2030 report, the announcements made by the Ministry of Sport or Tourism, or the statements from state affiliated companies or organizations, academic literature, and media reports, and NGO publications such as Amnesty International. The empirical analysis was organized into five thematic domains: hosting of mega-events, development of domestic infrastructure and new facilities, sponsorship of teams or competitions by state-affiliated companies or organizations, investing in international sport leagues, teams or streaming rights, and finally, engaging and using well-renowned athletes. These were then evaluated through the theoretical lenses of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding in order to assess how Saudi Arabia is using sportswashing and whether it effectively builds its soft power and shapes its global image.

The thesis set out to answer the central research question: *How does Saudi Arabia use sportswashing to build soft power and reshape its international image ?*. Through the analysis of the five key domains mentioned above, the research finds that Saudi Arabia is using sports deliberately as a soft power instrument aimed at rebranding and improving its image and global recognition. However, the findings also reveal that the effectiveness of these efforts is

mixed and dependent on the context and audience. What emerged from the analysis is the paradox that the more Saudi Arabia invests and builds, the more criticism it gets. With every new signing in the SPL and every new stadium built, the country is under a bigger and bigger spotlight from the international community. This increased visibility then leads to the issues that the Kingdom is trying to sportswash, so although there are more talks about the regime, it does not necessarily mean positive talks only. This results in a fragile legitimacy that is supported by investment but undermined by contradiction. Effectively, Saudi Arabia has bought visibility and maybe partial credibility, but it still has a long road to go if it wants to achieve the aims of its projects and the full potential of sports.

Based on the findings, the thesis concludes that Saudi Arabia is deliberate in the deployment of sportswashing in order to rebrand and enhance its global image and gain more soft power. While the research successfully addressed the main research question, it also revealed that the impact needs to be studied further. Thus, the research puzzle has been partially resolved, but it has also created a new research gap, as the mechanisms of sportswashing have been evaluated and exposed, but their effects have not been answered. In order to fully understand how Saudi Arabia is using sportswashing to build soft power and reshape its international image, further research should focus on the impact of sportswashing among targeted foreign publics and whether its sportswashing activities have shifted its global image and helped build or strengthen its soft power.

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