

**Sportswashing and Soft Power: A Critical Analysis of Saudi
Arabia's Strategic Use of Global Sport Events to Reconstruct
Its International Image**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

API	Application Programming Interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CNBC	Consumer News and Business Channel
CNN	Cable News Network
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSV	Comma-Separated Values
DAZN	DAZN (streaming service)
EPL	English Premier League
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IOC	International Olympic Committee
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
LIV	LIV Golf
MBS	Mohammed bin Salman (Saudi Arabian De Facto Ruler, Crown Prince)
NBA	National Basketball Association
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NEOM	NEOM (Saudi Arabian city project)
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations

NYT	New York Times
PGA	Professional Golfers' Association
PIF	Public Investment Fund
RQ	Research Question
SSC	Saudi Sports Company
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USA	United States of America
WWE	World Wrestling Entertainment

ATTESTATION OF OWNERSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Karthik Koundinya Challa

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The Indian Value "मातृ देवो भव, पितृ देवो भव, आचार्य देवो भव" (Mātr Devo Bhava, Pitṛ Devo Bhava, Ācārya Devo Bhava) – revere your mother as God, your father as God, your teacher as God. This profound teaching reminds us that our parents, our teachers, and the guiding forces in our lives shape who we become. This belief has accompanied me throughout my academic journey, and it feels fitting to begin my acknowledgements with it.

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of sportswashing and soft power have gained prominence as contested theories for understanding the practice of sport event diplomacy in the context of state-sponsored sports events in the contemporary geopolitical world. This study explores the ways in which the kingdom of Saudi Arabia uses global sports events as a tool for creating a new image for the country as a modern nation and for practicing soft power by employing Vision 2030 as a key tool for national transformation. This study also delves into how the practice of sportswashing and soft power have been framed and contested through Western media, regional media, and social media, particularly with regard to its practice in the context of Saudi Arabian sport event diplomacy and its global implications for sports politics and human rights discourse.

This study employs a qualitative methodological approach for its research, drawing upon an interpretivist research paradigm. The theory of Soft Power as conceptualized by Nye (2004) and Critical Discourse Analysis as conceptualized by Fairclough (1992) have been employed as a theoretical framework for this study. Netnography as a qualitative methodological approach has been utilised for gathering data comprising Western news articles, regional news articles, YouTube videos and comments. Subsequently, Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis and NVivo 15 was employed for data analysis and management.

The findings reveal four interlinked mechanisms by which Saudi Arabia utilises sport events, including domestic nation-building, international prestige, cultural authenticity, and multi-sport event saturation strategy. The research reveals a significant distinction between Western understandings of sportswashing, which are driven by human rights issues, and regional understandings of development that are driven by economic change. The online space is characterised by contested discourse, where multiple interpretive

frameworks exist simultaneously. The inclusion of Vision 2030 is revealed to have limited efficacy for Western audience perception, while being effective for domestic legitimacy and commercial credibility. Thus, the study discovers that sportswashing and soft power are weaponized forms of discourse, rather than analytical tools.

Overall, this research reveals that Saudi Arabia's utilisation of sports event strategy is effective for generating domestic pride and international prestige yet continues to face legitimacy challenges within Western discourse. This is a significant revelation, highlighting tensions between competing understandings of truth regarding state-sponsored sporting investments.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of global sport events as tools for projecting national images, exercising soft power, and fostering economic development in Saudi Arabia. This study was motivated by a growing body of literature on sport event diplomacy and nation branding (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Grix & Houlihan, 2014) and the need for an in-depth empirical study of Saudi Arabia's sport event diplomacy efforts across multiple disciplines and media markets (Almahraj, 2023; Satish et al., 2024). The study focuses on the alleged use of sportswashing to improve nation branding, which is an attempt to divert the attention from existing human rights issues towards a more positive image of a country (Boykoff, 2022). Furthermore, the soft power theory (Nye, 2004) which provides theoretical framework of the use of sporting events to address a nation's political issues outlines the lens through which the study is carried out. Using a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data from written media texts through document analysis and from YouTube videos and their comments through netnography, this research will shed light on the ways in which the sport events strategy of Saudi Arabia is produced and contested in different media markets. The intention is to understand the narratives and discursive practices through which soft power is projected and contested in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative.

Sport events have emerged as tools for projecting international images and exercising soft power in various fields (Nye, 2004; Brannagan & Grix, 2016). Host nations can showcase their national infrastructure, organisational capabilities, and cultural identities to the world through major sport events, receiving favourable media coverage that can help to promote their international images.

1.1.1. Saudi Arabia's Sport Event Strategy

Saudi Arabia has become one of the most active and ambitious of nations in seeking to use sport events for nation branding and repositioning itself internationally (Ghabban et al., 2025; Satish et al., 2024). Such a strategy is a core strategy for Saudi Arabia, as it has developed a range of initiatives to promote sport events within its domestic borders and invest in sport events around the world. The implementation of such a strategy underpins the complex understanding by the Saudi government of how to utilise sport events to communicate its vision for transformation and diversification of the nation's economy away from oil dependency (Ghabban et al., 2025; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Satish et al., 2024).

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), serves as the primary investor for the Saudi government in its strategy to acquire influential sport event assets around the world (Satish et al., 2024). The 2021 takeover of Newcastle United Football Club in the English Premier League (EPL) has brought Saudi football clubs into the limelight of international media (Almahraj, 2023). The launch of LIV Golf and its rapid success as a rival tour to the PGA Tour has become a significant source of exposure for participants in golf competitions seeking massive prize money that has all but guaranteed them a position in international competitions for seasons beyond the events' launch (Satish et al., 2024). The impact of such achievements on the Saudi government exceeds the establishment of new properties for the government to use to create platforms for other events. Such initiatives also create gateways for Saudi Arabia to gain more prominent positions within international governing bodies for sport events (Ghabban et al., 2025).

The nation has made tremendous achievements in attracting major sport events to Saudi Arabia since announcing its vision for 2030 (Ghabban et al., 2025; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). The Kingdom has become one of the major players in Formula One racing, which

has hosted a Grand Prix event in Saudi Arabia in 2023 at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit which was a temporary street track. However, the construction of a dedicated F1 track in Qiddiya is under construction since 2024 and scheduled to be completed by 2027, which would allow the Kingdom to host large scale F1 events (Ghabban et al., 2025). Other major competitions that the Kingdom has adopted include boxing, which has attracted major titles to the nations such as the WWE, and international wrestlers (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). Other initiatives also seek to expand the country's football divisions, as well as its appeal by signing players from other nations who can attract fans into the Saudi Pro League with record-breaking transfer fees for football players (Satish et al., 2024). The various sport events the Kingdom has engaged with also align with established objectives of the nation for nation branding efforts, such as expanding tourism for various events (Ghabban et al., 2025; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024).

Saudi Arabia's sport event strategy has several objectives that operate at various levels or stages of completion (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Satish et al., 2024). At the most basic level, the nation seeks to demonstrate that it remains an open nation to tourists and foreign nationals seeking to engage in sport events hosted within its international borders successfully (Ghabban et al., 2025). The sport events provide a medium through which these narratives can be communicated, as these events attract more tourists who can engage in other tourism-related activities on behalf of their nation. The initiation of these processes also provides a structured way for Saudi officials to develop its hospitality sector, allowing them to show their audiences how to present their unique culture, their specific element of culture or modernisation of the nation (Almahraj, 2023; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). The use of international athletes who compete within these initiatives also develop ambassadors who can engage with their fans on behalf of the Saudi government (Alnasser et al., 2024; Satish et al., 2024).

Recent research into investments made by the Saudi government into the development of its sport event industry has revealed that the Kingdom has adhered to specific goals and objectives set out in its vision for 2030 for all investments made in the sport event industry (Satish et al., 2024). The Riyadh Season initiative, or festival, which takes place annually over multiple months, is an example of such an initiative. The platform intends to communicate the significant developments taking place within Saudi Arabia to tourists who participate in events as an entertaining festival that aligns with other nations developing similar tourism initiatives (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Satish et al., 2024). These initiatives can be viewed not as isolated efforts to improve tourism statistics through sport event tourism, but rather, they are an integral step in developing a comprehensive strategy for generating soft power effects for the nation (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Satish et al., 2024). Infrastructure projects are a crucial element of Saudi Arabia's sport event strategy (Ghabban et al., 2025). The Kingdom has invested heavily in the construction of stadiums, training facilities, and ancillary infrastructure that meet international standards, meeting immediate sport event-related infrastructure needs and creating a legacy that will enable the development of domestic sport events, enhancing the attractiveness of Saudi Arabia as a destination for future sport events (Knott et al., 2016). The construction of state-of-the-art sport event-related facilities communicates the message that Saudi Arabia is a technologically advanced nation, a leader in modernisation, and one that is committed to a long-term future of sport events in the country (Favre, 2025). The integration of sport event-related facilities into plans for urban development mega-projects, such as Qiddiya entertainment city and NEOM smart city, exemplifies a strategic approach to using sport events as tools for national transformation rather than viewing them as isolated or short-term projects (Alnasser et al., 2024; Ghabban et al., 2025; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025).

Preliminary indications of the success of Saudi Arabia's nation branding through its hosting of sport events suggest mixed and contested reactions (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). The Kingdom has proven successful in establishing a sound financial foundation for its sport event hosting ambitions, gaining significant financial returns from hosting events, attracting elite athletes, and generating substantial international media coverage across various sport event categories (Ghabban et al., 2025; Satish et al., 2024). Survey evidence from those who have attended sport events in Saudi Arabia suggests that they have generally positive impressions of the events and their experiences (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). The international media has expressed its critical views of Saudi Arabia's human rights situation and political developments, however, with an escalation of such comments in the aftermath of the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (Almahraj, 2023; Ludvigsen, 2021). The concept of sportswashing has become closely associated with the Kingdom's media coverage through the international media, potentially limiting the soft power gains that such sporting successes would otherwise create for Saudi Arabia (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Almahraj's (2023) analysis of British newspaper coverage of Saudi sport events indicates a complex situation in this regard, revealing how different audiences with diverse perspectives interactively engage with international media coverage of the Kingdom's investments in sport events, employing a variety of frames of reference, from sportswashing to geopolitical analysis and evaluations of the events' merits. The diversity of frames suggests that Saudi Arabia has achieved considerable awareness and attention for its sport event strategy yet has not achieved any repositioning of its international image to date that is uniformly positive (Almahraj, 2023; Favre, 2025). Different audiences, media outlets, and political actors have different ideological and analytical perspectives on the Kingdom's sport event investments, generating contested narratives

rather than uniformly positive ones (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). The digital communication platforms used to promote and publicise contemporary sport events offer Saudi the opportunity to engage with a worldwide audience while also creating opportunities for voices that express dissenting opinions to be heard (Alnasser et al., 2024).

Saudi Arabia's future regarding sport events seems bright in light of the critical role that the hosting of events has been assigned within Vision 2030 and the significant investments that have already been made (Ghabban et al., 2025; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025; Satish et al., 2024). The Kingdom has expressed its interest in bidding for the Olympic Games, while its portfolio of recurring annual events is continually expanding (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Favre, 2025). Factors, such as maintaining high-quality events with positive experiences for attendees, changes to domestic policies that currently generate criticism from the international community on specific human rights and political liberalisation issues, achieve notable milestones in implementing Vision 2030's plans for diversifying the economy and transforming society. Also, ongoing international interest in the developments of Saudi Arabia despite continued criticism of its nation branding efforts, all have important bearings on whether Saudi Arabia succeeds in achieving its objectives for nation branding through its hosting of events (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Satish et al., 2024). The Saudi case study provides important insights into both the limitations and possibilities of using sport events as tools for nation branding for nations seeking significant and rapid repositioning of their international images despite ongoing human rights concerns and criticism (Ludvigsen, 2021; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). Despite the growing prominence of Saudi Arabia's significant investments in global sporting events—including hosting the FIFA World Cup 2034, securing the 2029 Asian Winter Games, and attracting high-profile athletes—scholarly analysis of how Saudi Arabia itself frames and narrates these investments remains limited. Existing

literature predominantly examines Saudi Arabia's sportswashing activities through Western media perspectives, often dominated by human rights critiques (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Buigues, 2019). However, there is a considerable research gap regarding the counter-narratives, media strategies, and internal framing that Saudi Arabia employs to legitimize these sporting investments. This study addresses this gap by critically examining how Saudi Arabia constructs and disseminates alternative narratives around its sport events strategy. Specifically, it investigates the divergence between Western media critiques of "sportswashing" and the regional and domestic narratives that position sport events as integral to Vision 2030's broader development agenda. Understanding these competing narratives is essential for comprehending how nation-states employ sport strategically in the contemporary global media landscape, where digital platforms enable simultaneous circulation of multiple, often contradictory, discourses. Furthermore, this research contributes to broader theoretical debates about soft power, nation branding, and the effectiveness of sports diplomacy in an era of increased global scrutiny and digital activism. By analysing Saudi Arabia's case, the dissertation illuminates how states negotiate, contest, and potentially overcome international criticism through strategic use of sport events and media narratives.

1.2 Aim of the Research

Given the increasing prominence of Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy in global media and political discourse, this research aims to examine how global sport events are deployed by Saudi Arabia as instruments of national image projection and soft power. Also, this research aims to show how these deployments are framed and contested across Western media, regional media, and digital platforms. Specifically, the study is concerned with the alignment of the sport events strategy with Vision 2030's economic and social objectives, and with how the concepts of sportswashing and soft power are

operationalised within the Saudi Arabian context and what their implications are for global sport politics and human rights discourse.

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How is Saudi Arabia using global sport events to influence international perceptions and project a modernised national image?

RQ2: What narratives are presented in global and regional media, social media platforms, and digital content regarding Saudi Arabia's sport event-hosting activities?

RQ3: To what extent is Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy aligned with its Vision 2030 agenda, and how effective has it been in achieving the desired shift in global perception?

RQ4: How are concepts of sportswashing and soft power operationalised within the Saudi Arabian context, and what are the implications for global sport politics and human rights discourse?

1.3 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation comprises six chapters. Chapter One contains the introduction to the research, including the background to the study and the research questions. Chapter Two contains an overview of existing literature related to the research topic. Chapter Three describes the research design, including the interpretivist philosophical stance, qualitative research methodology, netnographic and document analysis methods, and data collection and thematic analysis procedures. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, presented around four themes: sport events and national image projection; media narratives and digital discourse; integration with Vision 2030 and variance in impact; and operationalisation and contestation of sportswashing and soft power. Finally, Chapter Five discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and existing

literature. Chapter Six concludes the study, including its contributions, limitations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Chapter Preview

This chapter reviews the scholarly literature pertinent to understanding how nations employ sport events as strategic tools for image construction and international influence. The chapter is organized around four core areas: (1) the conceptual foundations of nation branding and sport diplomacy; (2) soft power and sportswashing theories; (3) media narratives and the role of discourse in legitimizing or contesting sporting investments; and (4) the theoretical frameworks of soft power and critical discourse theory, that guide this study's analysis. While these areas are presented sequentially, they are interconnected. The literature review thus establishes that sport events are powerful sites of international competition where states deploy multiple, sometimes contradictory, narratives to advance their strategic interests and construct favourable international images and builds toward an understanding of how Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy functions within these theoretical and discursive contexts, providing the foundation for the analysis presented in later chapters.

2.2. Global Sport Events and National Image

2.2.1. Nation Branding

Nation branding is a systematic process that countries go through to manage their reputation for economic, political and cultural purposes (Anholt, 2007; Fan, 2010). Nation branding can be defined as a strategic process through which nations build, monitor, evaluate and actively manage their reputation in order to enhance their reputation among international audiences (Fan, 2010). Several elements are evident from this definition: a deliberate process, the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the image creation process, and an objective of a favourable reputation (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Nation branding encompasses a wide range of processes related to politics, economy and

culture, which sets it apart from destination branding, which relates specifically to tourism destinations (Anholt, 2007; Knott et al., 2016).

The development of nation branding as a discipline reflects shifts in international relations and global communication patterns (Fan, 2010; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). In the current global environment, nations compete, not only with physical resources and products, but also with non-material resources and symbolic processes that shape their relationships with various audiences around the world (Nye, 2004). The value of symbolic and cultural resources that are exchanged between different nations has therefore increased (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

The processes involved in using sport events as a tool for nation branding operate at multiple levels (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Knott et al., 2016). On a visible level, sport events can be utilised to show off the capabilities of national infrastructures, such as transportation systems and hospitality networks to visitors and media from all over the world (Hemmonsby & Tichaawa, 2018). The physical structures and facilities that are built around the events also act as visible manifestations of the development of national infrastructures and capabilities (Ghabban et al., 2025). Sport events also provide opportunities for showcasing elements of national cultures through cultural programmes and events (Li & Xu, 2023; Shahid et al., 2025). Finally, the media coverage that sport events generate can raise awareness of a nation and its culture around the globe among audiences who may have never encountered its name or culture before (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

2.2.2. Sport Event Diplomacy

Sport events, with their universal appeal, emotional power, and the ability to create massive global audiences, are unique vehicles for nation branding efforts (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Grix, 2012). Through sport event diplomacy, athletic competitions have become a means for engaging in diplomatic relations and projecting a national

identity (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Unlike more traditional forms of diplomacy which utilise formal government-to-government relations, sport event diplomacy utilises a more cultural and symbolic approach, leveraging the connections and global audiences that sporting events can create (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). The sport event diplomacy of today conveys power, capability, and sophistication through mega-events which reach billions of viewers around the globe (Shahid et al., 2025). Case studies demonstrate how various nations have utilised sport events to rebrand their nations, highlighting successes and shortcomings in this effort (Grix, 2012; Knott et al., 2016). The cases examine the interplay between sport events, media coverage, and international perceptions of a nation rebranding effort, identifying factors such as pre-existing reputations, political contexts, and the capabilities of those who put on the event (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018).

China's 2008 Beijing Olympics marked one of the most extensive efforts to utilise a sport event for nation rebranding purposes (Li & Xu, 2023). The Chinese government envisioned using the event to show off its advances in modernisation, developments in its economy, and its rising status as a global player (Li & Xu, 2023; Shahid et al., 2025). Beijing invested billions into constructing new infrastructure, demonstrating its economic power and capabilities for successfully organising an event (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Yet the event drew new levels of scrutiny from the international community over issues, such as human rights, the environment, and the political system, showing how mega-events are two-sided when it comes to attracting attention (Ludvigsen, 2021; Li & Xu, 2023).

Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup is an example of one of the most extensive nation-wide efforts to utilise a sport event for nation rebranding purposes in recent history (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). With estimated total costs of well over USD 200 billion for infrastructure development including the building of new stadiums,

transportation systems, and hospitality complexes, the event provided an unprecedented opportunity for the small Gulf nation to rebrand itself and gain recognition globally (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). The event enabled Qatar to present Arab and Islamic culture to the world through opening ceremonies, cultural events, and maintaining a strong presence in international media coverage (Al-Emadi et al., 2017). However, like other mega sport events, the tournament has faced extensive criticism over issues such as labour conditions, LGBT rights, and its selection process legitimacy (Ludvigsen, 2021; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). Research conducted by Al-Emadi et al. (2017) on perceptions of impacts from local residents of the event in Qatar explore some of the local dimensions of mega-event impacts. However, other research published by Brannagan and Reiche (2022) explores a wide range of topics related to their research on nation rebranding efforts via mega- sport events, uncovering successes and failures with such tactics.

Germany's 2006 FIFA World Cup is a case study on utilising a sport event successfully for nation rebranding efforts (Grix, 2012). Prior to the event, many Germans had positive views of their nation due to their emphasis on efficiency, quality, and precision as engineering and manufacturing nations; however, they were also viewed as lacking in being personable or an approachable nation (Grix, 2012). The 2006 FIFA World Cup provided a chance for Germany to showcase themselves as cosmopolitan and welcoming to tourists and international players alike. Despite early reluctance on the part of Germans to embrace the event, which became surprisingly festive in nature with diverse public viewing areas, Germany was able to create images of festiveness that were widely disseminated through media that ultimately softened its image while enhancing existing views of their nations successfully (Grix, 2012; Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

The 2010 FIFA World Cup held in South Africa was a turning point for more than just the host nation; it also involved the continent of Africa as a whole (Hemmonsbey &

Tichaawa, 2018). International audiences had a positive impression of attending events in Africa prior to the tournament, yet pre-event media coverage focused on deterrence, focusing on issues such as crime against tourists, and the readiness of its infrastructure for an event of this magnitude (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018). An analysis of international media coverage of pre-event conditions in South Africa was conducted by Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa (2018). However, their research focuses on how various stakeholders viewed the impacts that their efforts created in altering perceptions of South Africa as a suitable venue for events of this magnitude. Their study shows how such efforts can be short-lived without additional effort being made to utilise additional leveraging activities in various settings to create sustained impacts. Other research conducted by Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa (2018) shows how efforts to alter perceptions of a nation that has hosted a mega-event are generally unsuccessful without continued efforts to utilise various leveraging activities in different venues across the nation. Other research on these cases (Knott et al., 2016) outlines strategies for leveraging events for nation branding opportunities when they are being set up or after they occur. In addition, these studies show how better coordination of efforts between various stakeholders involved in mega-events can lead to better outcomes than if they had failed to plan for potential opportunities or challenges that might arise.

The conceptual frameworks of nation branding and sport event diplomacy, present relevant analytical lenses to make sense of the reasons that nations invest such significant resources into the creation of major sport events, and the ways in which such events can be leveraged to reconfigure international perceptions of the nation of origin (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Cases from around the globe, encompassing instances as diverse as China and South Africa, indicate wide-ranging strategies and outcomes of a potentially useful range of magnitudes, all suggesting the limits as well as possibilities of sport event-led nation branding efforts (Grix, 2012;

Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018; Li & Xu, 2023). Yet Saudi Arabia's innovative, and never seen before current strategy, Ghabban et al. (2025) and Satish et al. (2024) state is the best example of how multiple sport event platforms can be harnessed to achieve the goal of national transformation and rebranding a nation for better international acceptance. Preliminary insights into the relationship between sporting success, and the lingering effects of criticism about the political context in which a mega-event is held, suggest a complex web of variables whose interplay can impact the outcomes of nation branding efforts in contested political contexts (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

2.3. Sportswashing and Soft Power

2.3.1. Sportswashing

The term sportswashing, and the critical discourse of sport events, emerged recently in English language publications, and first entered the public discourse in 2015 ahead of the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan (Ludvigsen, 2021). Human rights activist Rebecca Vincent used it in a press release for the Sport for Rights campaign to refer to an attempt to distract from human rights violations with the promise of a prestigious event or sponsorship (Boykoff, 2022). Over the course of the last seven years, however, sportswashing has become an established term in the human rights discourse, especially as regards the involvement of major international human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Boykoff, 2022). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have indeed incorporated events into their campaigns and educational materials, thus increasing its use and familiarity. The Norwegian Language Board's designation of sportswashing as its word of the year in 2021 also shows its accepted use (Skey, 2023).

Boykoff (2022) provides the first detailed analysis of sportswashing and defines it as an attempt by political elites to use sporting events to enhance their international reputation while emphasising the virtues of their nation. This distracts from persistent domestic

social issues and violations of human rights. Grounding this definition, Grix and Brannagan (2022) extend the concept of sportswashing by conceptualising it as a social relation that encompasses various audiences with various political orientations, ranging from authoritarian to democratic states. El-Dabt et al. (2023), for their part, analyse the effects of sportswashing on the “sports-washers,” who experience an enhancement to their international reputation in the form of increased national prestige, as well as enhanced perceptions of their political or economic development. Black et al. (2024), however, add another layer of complexity to sportswashing by invoking the concept of fetishistic disavowal to understand how audiences can acknowledge yet choose to ignore the human rights violations associated with sporting events, thus creating complicated relationships of complicity and resistance towards the events and their political backers. While greenwashing typically applies to corporate environmental misdeeds, sportswashing operates on a different level as a process in which states appropriate the cultural “power” of sporting events and their unique global appeal for their own political and ideological purposes (Grix & Brannagan, 2024). Skey (2023), however, raises important methodological questions about whether sportswashing functions primarily as a useful analytic concept, or if it merely creates a useful media headline. These questions raise important issues in English language publications, as they open up the debate on the analytical utility of sportswashing as a term. Grix and Brannagan (2024), for example, ask whether it has any analytical power, and how well it applies across various political systems.

Concepts related to sportswashing have shaped the concept, especially greenwashing as a process used by corporations to hide their environmental misdeeds, but also whitewashing which describes the attempt of an organisation or individual to hide their misdeeds by shifting attention to something else, such as a public relations campaign. Black et al. (2024) thus see sportswashing as an extension of these related concepts. Grix

and Brannagan (2024), for example, view sportswashing in the context of other uses of sporting mega-events as tools of foreign policy but distinguish between legitimate soft power strategies and more cynical uses that aim at mere reputation laundering. Previous research into this topic has already explored similar processes in other countries, such as Qatar (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016), where they found that the national branding aspirations of its Olympic bid organisation did not match up with the harsh realities of migrant worker conditions. They did this by conducting surveys and interviews with international supporters of the event. Gouveia (2022), for example, analysed the Lusophony Games in Macau, which are part of China's soft power strategy, showing how its linguistic ties can be leveraged to create an intercultural sporting event to enhance geopolitical objectives. Nicolescu and Barbu (2024), for example, also compared sporting mega-events across different nations and states, but found that their effects on enhancing soft power in nations vary widely, depending on pre-existing perceptions of those nations, and even the credibility of their commitments.

As useful as it has proven to be, however, the sportswashing concept has several limitations that make it important to reassess its use. Skey (2023), for example, asks if the term only applies to authoritarian states, thus limiting its conceptual use in English language publications. Boykoff (2022) provides an example of how Los Angeles has used its preparations for the 2028 Olympics to distract from its own homelessness crisis, despite the fact that United Nations officials have already determined that conditions on Skid Row are worse than in Syrian refugee camps. Los Angeles city officials have proud declarations on their website stating how they will use the event to resolve the issue. This example, however, indicates that sportswashing operates in a wider range of political systems than mere authoritarian states. More examples of this use of sporting mega-events can also be found in other systems, such as America (Boykoff & McFeely, 2025), where they have historically been part of the state's soft power efforts during times of

international conflict, as seen in their use of the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. Thus, while such events may be particularly attractive to authoritarian states who seek to improve their international image through sporting mega-events, they are certainly not limited to such states (Wolfe et al., 2025). Furthermore, other authors question whether it has any methodological or conceptual clarity, or if it merely serves as a politically charged concept that obscures its analytic use (Skey, 2023).

2.3.2. Soft Power

Joseph Nye's (2004) initial theories about soft power provide a valid theoretical framework for studying states' use of sport events for political purposes. However, Nye (2004) acknowledged that attempts to use soft power are more challenging than using hard power because many resources for soft power are outside a government's control. Jarvie (2024) examined sport events, soft power, and cultural relations in his study, looking into how events can support diplomacy and create an environment for cooperation between nations yet remain a reflection of existing power dynamics. Alshikhy et al. (2023) examined the use of sport mega-events and soft power in their research, exploring how these events can improve or worsen a nation's reputation depending on how they respond to international criticism for their use of the events.

The application of soft power theories to authoritarian states reveals a set of limitations and tensions that have already been well documented by researchers. However, Wolfe et al. (2025) noted that Nye's theory still sees the powers as fundamentally opposed, despite his claims of a spectrum. However, Boykoff (2022) raises questions on how often soft power's attraction is not subtly yet firmly linked to hard power's military strength, thus suggesting that what may be seen as soft power from the perspective of a democratic state may actually be "sharp power" that relies on the sociolinguistic crafting of a new social reality through representational power rather than a fact-based argument. Colleagues further expand upon this question in their research by examining how authoritarian states

use sport events as a political tool in their foreign policy, thus blurring Nye's line between soft and hard power (Grix & Brannagan, 2022).

Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) have made important contributions to theories on sport events, soft power, and soft disempowerment. Their conceptual framework accepts that sport event-based soft power strategies do not impact all audiences equally; there will always be some level of scepticism, resistance, and counter-narratives that undermine these efforts. Søyland and Moriconi Bezerra (2022) expanded upon this conceptual framework when they explored how nations can balance competing interests in diplomats while addressing concerns raised about their sport event participation while also seeking to improve their international standing. The frameworks of soft power and soft disempowerment create a more nuanced lens through which researchers can examine various audiences' perceptions of state-sponsored sport event occurrences; after all, one event can create a wide variety of meanings and impacts for those who engage with it (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Grix & Brannagan, 2024).

One of the primary challenges addressing soft power through sport events is ensuring that they maintain their credibility and authenticity when faced with states that do not have a great human rights record and that host mega-events or invest in international sport events (Wolfe et al., 2025). El-Dabt et al. (2023) explored sustainable strategic nation branding through sport events and confirmed that states must focus on establishing credibility and authenticity around their use of soft power if they want to experience positive impacts on their reputation from hosting mega-events if they use the event to promote their nation branding. Gerschewski et al. (2024) empirically researched this question by designing a survey experiment that surveyed over 14,000 individuals across eight European countries. The researchers found that framing the Qatar 2022 World Cup solely in relation to human rights concerns produced more negative impacts for enhancing the state's reputation. However, the researchers further found that framing it in relation to the successful

organisational capabilities of the state produced a positive impact. Thus, their research indicates that critical reporting on these states can hinder their sportswashing efforts, while uncritical reporting can enhance the legitimacy of autocracies. These impacts demonstrate that the effectiveness of soft power builds on the information environment and media structure of receiving countries (Gerschewski et al., 2024). The next section explores how media narratives, and even more so the evolving discourse on digital platforms, wield decisive influence over the outcomes of sport event-led nation branding efforts in general, and on the increasing role of communication in linking sport events and their brand benefits.

2.4. Global vs Regional Media Narratives

2.4.1. Traditional Media and Social Media Narratives

Traditional media outlets have historically been the main source of information about sport events, and they have considerable power to shape the views of the international public regarding the host country (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023). Research on the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar shows that media framing has a significant impact on public opinion (Gerschewski et al., 2024). The survey experiment in eight European countries found that framing the event in a way that enhanced the perceived organisational capacity of the host country improved respondents' attitudes toward the event, whereas framing that highlighted human rights concerns reduced their positive attitudes (Gerschewski et al., 2024). Through selection and emphasis, media outlets create narratives that either legitimise or delegitimise host countries (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023; Daoudi et al., 2025).

Altered treatment of host countries by Western media outlets has been identified as a research issue. Daoudi et al. (2025) found that Western media outlets tended to politicise Qatar 2022, focusing on human rights and workers' rights to highlight value conflicts, which transformed sport event reporting into political discourse. However, Al Jazeera

focused on the celebratory aspects of the tournament and downplayed issues that did not suit its political interests (Daoudi et al., 2025). The two different sets of narratives show how media framing reflects the biases and interests of different actors involved in creating sport events, leading to different views among the public and reinforcing them (Daoudi et al., 2025).

International sources were referred to more often than Qatari sources in the media reports, showing how the media coverage conforms to the views of elite institutional actors (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023; Bonsu, 2025). Western media outlets typically focus on cultural differences and controversy when covering events organised by non-Western countries, at the expense of sporting achievements (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). Research shows that the media coverage prior to the event tends to focus on controversy and criticism, while the sporting event itself elicits more neutral or positive coverage, though negative frames can persist (Bonsu (2025).

Systematic differences have been found in the way Western and non-Western media outlets cover sport events (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023). Western outlets tend to use a critical framing of events organised by non-Western countries that focuses on human rights, labour conditions, and the promotion of democracy, while events organised by Western countries elicit a celebratory narrative (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). Regional media outlets have different narratives that reflect their geopolitical positions. Al Jazeera focused on the infrastructural achievements of the event and promoted a sense of regional pride, countering Western dominance in international sport event reporting (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023; Daoudi et al., 2025).

The framing of sport events by Western and non-Western media outlets raises questions about who should be prioritised in sport event journalism across the globe (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). When Western outlets focus on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights in relation to Muslim-majority countries hosting events, while ignoring these concerns in relation to

events held in Western countries, it shows how cultural assumptions can influence journalists' attitudes toward certain groups (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). This has led to debates among researchers about whether this different treatment of events should be viewed as a legitimate means of exercising rights-based journalism, or whether it reflects an Orientalist attitude toward the coverage of non-Western events by Western media outlets (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025).

Digital platforms have revolutionised the way nations use events to promote their international diplomatic relations, allowing them to communicate directly with their audiences without needing to go through traditional media outlets (Manor, 2019). Visual storytelling and emotive narratives that rely on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter enable nations to communicate with their audiences in an intimate, almost personal way that is not comparable to the more formal communication styles typical of diplomatic relations (Manor, 2019). The athletes involved in events and the organisations responsible for them have become actors in international diplomacy through their social media presence, as their interactions with their fans can enhance or undermine their international reputations (Sanderson et al., 2016). However, digital diplomacy also has vulnerabilities. Social media platforms have become spaces for contesting dominant narratives about events and their hosts, and for promoting alternative interpretations of sport events (Manor, 2019; Sanderson et al., 2016). Digital platforms allow athletes, event organisers, national governments and civil society organisations to contest the narratives constructed by mainstream media outlets for events such as the FIFA World Cup by sharing content that counters their frames on social media platforms (Manor, 2019). Thanks to the democratisation of content creation on platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, audiences around the world are now exposed to multiple competing narratives about events and may even come across narratives that were previously inaccessible to them (Zhang & Tang, 2024). Research on media discourse and nation-building shows that

athlete activism on social media can create counter-narratives to exclusionary nationalism in sport events, particularly regarding race and immigration issues (Mauro, 2025). The success of narratives that contest dominant frames depends on various factors, however, including algorithms and influencer networks on social media platforms (Manor, 2019; Zhang & Tang, 2024). The proliferation of user-generated content in digital environments has transformed sport events into participatory digital experiences through which fans consume and produce content, influencing the event narrative (Zhang & Tang, 2024). The resulting participatory dynamics mark a significant departure from broadcast television-era sport event communication, in which sport governing bodies or leagues exerted greater control over event narratives (Zheng & Mason, 2022). Branded hashtag campaigns demonstrate how sports organisations co-opt user-generated content to extend the event message and foster a sense of community with fans (Manor, 2019).

2.4.2. Case Studies of Counter-Narratives

Systematic differences appear between international and regional media systems in how they approach sport events, corresponding to their systemically determined emphasis and orientation (Daoudi et al., 2025). International media outlets (especially those originating from Western nations) focus on universal rights regimes and organisational controversies in relation to non-Western hosts (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025; Daoudi et al., 2025). International media outlets that covered Qatar 2022 relied on international sources, human rights organisations and framed the tournament's achievements in terms of its global significance. They reserved little voice for Qatari officials (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023). Regional media systems preferred to emphasise infrastructural achievements and followed preferred official government perspectives (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023). The resulting different information environments create divergent narratives for audiences who consume different types of media (Zhang & Tang, 2024).

Coverage of the 2022 Qatar World Cup offers the most extreme example of this different coverage pattern. Western media systems framed the tournament in terms of human rights concerns regarding labour conditions, while regional media outlets were enthusiastic about the achievements of Arabs and the unprecedented infrastructural development that the tournament had facilitated (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). Research into BBC and CNN coverage found only negative accounts and an over-reliance on moralistic frames, failing to account for the unprecedented developments that the Qatari state had created to host the event (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025).

The 2022 Chinese Winter Olympics serves as another example in another geopolitical context. American media systems exhibited political bias in their coverage of the event, focusing on narratives around geopolitical tensions with the USA and the alleged uses of the event as a test ground for the development of electronic surveillance systems (Peng & Li, 2024). These two examples suggest that human rights concerns will almost always be a frame for understanding authoritarian states that host events. However, the specifics of such a narrative will be a function of political and cultural factors that are relevant to understanding the frame that applies across phenomena (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025; Peng & Li, 2024).

The distinction between state-controlled media systems and independent media systems has systematic implications for covering sport events because state-controlled media systems face an incentive to favour preferred narratives at the expense of a preference for the perception of critical narratives (Daoudi et al., 2025; Zhang & Tang, 2024). State-controlled media outlets have been less willing to allow for critical perspectives in their coverage of their national governments' hosting of events, despite the existence of the incentive to do so in a desire for international acclaim (Daoudi et al., 2025). State-controlled media systems that present favourable narratives of their national governments' achievements in hosting events are still able to allow for elements of a marketing

approach to their coverage. However, even commercial media outlets allow for market-driven determinants to predispose their coverage towards narratives that align with certain expectations or values (Ahmed & Al-Zoubi, 2025). An example of the role of state communication strategies in creating nationalism in support of particular diplomatic goals is the Chinese diplomatic discourse research that demonstrates how governments use digital platforms within a controlled ecosystem as a communication strategy to create nationalist sentiment. Thus, factors like culture, marketplace determinants, as well as political systems, all predispose media outlets to preferred narratives when covering sport events involving authoritarian governments (Daoudi et al., 2025).

2.4.3. Saudi Arabia's Media Narratives on Sports Events

Western media accounts of Saudi Arabia's sport event investments primarily employ sportswashing frames, emphasising the need to improve their reputation and mention human rights (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). The sportswashing frame, while it has merits, may oversimplify a complex reality of motivations and effects (Gerschewski et al., 2024). Studies confirm that the link between Saudi Arabia's sport event investments and its efforts to diversify its economy goes beyond a need to improve its reputation, also addressing the inclusion of young people and tourism (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). The selective application of sportswashing criticism in Western media accounts raises questions about its reliability, as many sport events organised by Western states receive limited scrutiny (Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025).

Media outlets in the Middle East and North Africa present a very different set of narratives regarding Saudi sport event investments, emphasising the developmental nature of events and framing them within a valid national agenda, rather than applying sportswashing frames (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023). These outlets often present a more positive view of the role that Saudi Arabia's sport event activities play in support of Vision 2030 and its links to the economic and social development of the country (Pratiwi & Muslikhati,

2024). Media in the region highlight the pan-Arab nature of Saudi Arabia's sport event investments, framing high-profile events as something in which other Arab nations can take pride (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2023).

Digital platforms exhibit contested narratives regarding Saudi sport event investments, as multiple and conflicting narratives are shared (Manor, 2019; Zhang & Tang, 2024). Saudi's social media campaigns, such as the #VisitSaudi campaign, demonstrate how Saudi Arabia attempts to reshape its narrative on social media, focusing on tourism and modernity (Manor, 2019). Campaigns like these can be highly effective at reaching younger audiences in the region (Manor, 2019). However, a significant amount of digital discourse also focuses on the limitations of the narratives that Saudi Arabia attempts to share on social media, with human rights organisations using platforms to share their perspectives and raise awareness about their concerns (Abeza, 2023). The specific characteristics of the digital platforms on which Saudi sport event investment narratives are shared also affect their development (Manor, 2019; Zhang & Tang, 2024). Instagram and YouTube platforms favour visual storytelling and influencer partnerships that Saudi Arabia has successfully harnessed to create a narrative that emphasises tourism. Twitter/X, however, is a platform that is more conducive to political debate and criticism of the narratives shared by Saudi Arabia, as well as opportunities for sharing official narratives and dissenting opinions (Zhang & Tang, 2024). The value of using social media to share narratives about sport events is disputed; most studies concur that it can be effective at raising awareness about the events among certain audiences, but it cannot change the minds of those who are already opposed to the developments (Gerschewski et al., 2024; Manor, 2019).

Media narratives regarding sport event investments influence international perceptions of their effectiveness, but the effectiveness of these narratives is related to whether or not

these narratives exist within a broader national development strategy, as will be explored in the next section.

2.5. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

2.5.1. Overview of Vision 2030's Sport Event Related Goals

Saudi Vision 2030 represents a comprehensive transformation framework positioning sport events as a critical pillar within economic diversification and social modernisation (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 explicitly targets reducing oil dependency while developing diverse sectors including tourism and sport events (Satish et al., 2021). The Quality-of-Life Program establishes targets, including increasing weekly physical activity participation to 40 % by 2030, enhancing sport event contributions to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and positioning Saudi Arabia as a premier event destination (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Vision 2030's strategy encompasses both grassroots participation initiatives and elite competition hosting (Satish et al., 2021; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). The Saudi Sports for All Federation exemplifies institutional commitment to expanding community participation targeting women, youth, and persons with disabilities (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Simultaneously, substantial investments in hosting rights for prestigious competitions including the 2034 FIFA World Cup position Saudi Arabia as an emerging global sport event power (Almahraj, 2023; Satish et al., 2021).

The Quality-of-Life Program operationalises Vision 2030's sport event objectives through coordinated initiatives spanning infrastructure development, programme delivery, and capacity building (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Specific measures include constructing world-class facilities, developing training programmes, and launching community engagement initiatives (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). The programme targets 143,746 employed in cultural sectors, 40% weekly sport event participation, and three Saudi cities among the world's top 100 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025).

Women's sport event participation programmes address historical under-representation while responding to social modernisation objectives (Dubinsky, 2023). Infrastructure investments extending beyond marquee stadiums to include community facilities reflect understanding that sustained participation requires accessible environments (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025).

Vision 2030 establishes explicit economic targets for sport event sector contribution (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Tourism receives particular emphasis with sport events positioned as key international visitor drivers (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). The government aims to increase annual tourism employment to 1.6 million direct employees while establishing 613 entertainment venues nationwide (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Saudi investments reflect determination to position the Kingdom as a regional and global sport event hub (Almahraj, 2023; Satish et al., 2021). The sport event sector's targeted GDP contribution encompasses direct activity from event hosting alongside indirect effects through tourism spending and ancillary business development (Satish et al., 2021; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025).

2.5.2. Evaluation Frameworks for Measuring Sport Strategy Impact

Measuring sport event diplomacy effectiveness offers methodological challenges requiring frames of reference that encompass results (Abdi et al., 2018; Murray & Pigman, 2014). These are insulated from conventional approaches, current thinking frames definitions, collection methods, and analysis techniques (Abdi et al., 2018; Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Relevant frames of reference include quantitative measures such as participation levels. Additionally, they include qualitative measures based on stakeholders' perception of events (Knott et al., 2017; Murray & Pigman, 2014). Various evaluation methods exist, including nation brand studies measuring changes in perception, economic studies measuring the outcome and social network analysis studies identifying relationships between participating parties (Jeong et al., 2024; Knott et al., 2017).

However, it remains challenging to attribute effects to specific periods while discounting the role of other initiatives from different domains within the same diplomatic framework (Abdi et al., 2018; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Impact assessments evolved as they revealed discrepancies between expected outcomes and actual outcomes (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). The current approach assesses both gross activity and net outcomes while taking opportunity cost and displacement into account (Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Expectations are always higher than actual outcomes due to the omission of variables such as substitution and crowding out when assessing initial impacts (Loland, 2021). Therefore, long-term impact assessments must factor in legacy impacts such as enhanced tourism or optimal utilisation of sporting venues (Al-Emadi et al., 2017). The case study of the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup fits this expectation given the USD 200 billion spent on the event and the event's expected contribution of 1.6 % to 2.9 % of national economic output (Al-Emadi et al., 2017). Reputation impact assessments require methodologies that measure changes in how international audiences perceive the nations involved (Almahraj, 2023; Jeong et al., 2024). Major sporting events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup events benefit from broad exposure to their impacts. These events have worldwide appeal reaching billions of fans (Jeong et al., 2024; Wolfe et al., 2025). However, they can also generate adverse effects as human rights issues generate adverse publicity (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

2.5.3. Sport-Event and National Development

Sport event integration into national development agendas constitutes a paradigm shift in government policy (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Current scholarship recognises sport events as multifaceted tools for achieving economic development, social integration, and international standing (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Knott et al., 2017). Nations purposefully integrate sport event programming into their

strategies for boosting tourism, enhancing economic development, and developing sustainable diplomatic relations (Abdi et al., 2018). Today governments acknowledge that investment in strategically selected sport events generates considerable spillover effects that extend beyond physical sports competitions (Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024; Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). Thus, governments have formalised the objectives of these events into national vision documents linked to measurable outcomes for health, education, and economic performance as well as international standing (Zeineddine, 2017).

The promotion of economic development underpins the integration of sport events into national development agendas, particularly in resource-dependent nations (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Zeineddine, 2017). Nations in the Middle East exemplify the widespread investment in sport event infrastructure projects focused on developing sustainable tourism that can generate economic activity and create jobs while also establishing new sustainable sectors independent from hydrocarbon revenues (Satish et al., 2021). The potential for sport events to generate significant economic activity through increased tourism and spending by spectators, as well as the development of new infrastructural projects and the establishment of sustainable tourism initiatives, has attracted the interest of numerous nations (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Knott et al., 2017). The contribution of the sport sector to GDP figures has been explicitly targeted within many development agendas with the development of sustainable tourism ecosystems enabling the creation of a significant number of jobs across numerous sectors (Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024; Satish et al., 2024).

There is an aim to achieve a variety of goals beyond economic development, including the promotion of youth participation in physical activity, enhancement of public health outcomes, and promotion of national identities (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Efforts to systematically promote physical activity among youth helps combat issues, such as obesity and chronic illness while fostering greater integration

among citizens from diverse backgrounds (Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Development initiatives aim to increase participation rates among citizens. Current development plans include specific programmes focused on increasing participation among specific demographics, including women, people with disabilities, and youth (El-Dabt et al., 2025). International sport events provide numerous opportunities for nations to generate new sources of pride that can help overcome divisions within their societies while developing shared narratives around their achievements in the sport world (Knott et al., 2017; Satish et al., 2024). Strategic investments in programmes designed to identify new talent in young athletes helps to increase the number of competitive athletes from that nation who participate in international competitions while also fostering continued growth in participation rates among younger athletes through the development of new grassroots programmes (El-Dabt et al., 2025; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025).

An initial assessment suggests that significant progress has been made in meeting infrastructure development requirements as well as acquiring a sufficient number of additional sport events to participate in, including challenges associated with measuring progress toward goals for participation rates, where sustainability concerns have emerged (Almahraj, 2023; Satish et al., 2021). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently acquired multiple high-profile events in various sports to host within its borders with the construction of state-of-the-art facilities to accommodate those competitions as well as the development of extensive programmes for incorporating communities into participating in these events (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; Satish et al., 2021). However, measuring progress toward achieving ambitious goals set for measuring increases in participation rates in specific events requires a systematic assessment approach (Ettinger, 2023). Questions have arisen regarding the use of those facilities outside of their designated uses for competitions with many concerns emerging regarding the viability of established professional sports leagues in these nations as well as the scope and impact

of programmes designed to encourage participation by citizens in various sports (Dubinsky, 2023).

Funding for initiatives aimed at achieving specific goals or ensuring that specific objectives are met may create issues in implementing the integration of sport events into national development agendas. For example, the emphasis on the early stages of the mega-event management process poses unique challenges to event planners and organisers (Ettinger, 2023; Loland, 2021). Implementing the integration of sport events into a nation's development agenda may require significant resources or commitments from state organisations involved in managing these events, but such commitments may divert resources that could otherwise be used to improve conditions for grassroots programmes focused on encouraging citizens to participate in sports activities (Loland, 2021; Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Yet the early phase of the event management process poses unique demands on event planners concerned with identifying all stakeholders that require information that will help them understand their roles in the event planning process. They also develop an awareness of the benefits that stakeholders provide that make it possible for them to participate in such events (Nicolescu & Barbu, 2024). Thus, significant investments may be required in the development of coaching education programmes or enhancements in organisational structures for governing these events rather than focusing investments in developing state-of-the-art facilities for competitions that attract spectators (Loland, 2021). Yet additional contradictions have emerged concerning issues such as those surrounding allegations of sportswashing practices being used by Saudi Arabia or its partners that have raised concerns from a variety of stakeholders regarding its human rights practices (Almahraj, 2023; Ettinger, 2023). Critics contend that the country's significant investment in organising sport events is being used primarily for reputation management purposes rather than a genuine desire to reform the country and improve conditions for its citizens (Almahraj, 2023; Dubinsky,

2023; Ettinger, 2023). Thus, such perceptions regarding the legitimacy of sport event integration into national development agendas can be overcome by demonstrating that real efforts are being made to effect genuine reforms to benefit citizens and projects in these nations rather than merely engaging in public relations efforts that help maintain a positive image for the ruling regime (Dubinsky, 2023).

2.5.4. Human Rights, Ethics, and Global Sport Events Politics

The convergence of human rights and sport mega-events is particularly relevant to understanding sportswashing dynamics. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created in 1948 but human rights as a discourse took shape in the 1970s (Boykoff, 2022). Human rights for free speech, abolition of torture, and wrongful imprisonment emerged, while the rights to the economy, which would involve vast-scale redistributions, took on a much narrower definition focused on basic needs (Boykoff, 2022). This gave human rights an application to sport event hosting with a particular emphasis on political and civil rights over economic and even economic and social rights. Human rights issues have become increasingly relevant to sport event hosting in the 21st century as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among others, now focus on the human rights implications of sport mega-events (Boykoff, 2022). The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar perhaps exemplifies the complexities surrounding the human rights implications of mega-event hosting arrangements and the conditions for migrant workers and labourers. Dubinsky (2022) examined the cultural clash at the Qatar World Cup and reflected on soft power and nation-branding, and sportswashing dynamics in the Arab region's first-ever World Cup. Bettine and Ozdemir (2022) analysed how Western media depicted the event, and their insights revealed how narratives shared by the media play a role in how human rights issues are understood in relation to sport events. Gerschewski et al. (2024) examined the limits of sportswashing through a pre-registered survey experiment, finding that significant sport events do not improve the perceptions of a host

nation when human rights concerns receive significant media attention. Søyland and Moriconi Bezerra (2022) examined how Qatar implemented a multi-actor approach that involved diplomacy, interactions with critics, and legitimacy-seeking actions to manage the flow of international scrutiny for its human rights record surrounding mega-event hosting. This indicates how sophisticated nation-states are in handling the controversies surrounding their human rights records linked to mega-event hosting.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activist groups have played an essential role in sport event politics by exposing human rights violations associated with such events, mobilising public sentiments, and pressuring organisations governing sporting events to address the ethical challenges in these events. The Sport for Rights campaign that popularised the term 'sportswashing' in 2015 is an example of how to effectively use sport events as a platform to convey human rights agendas (Boykoff, 2022). Gerschewski et al. (2024) examined how NGOs concerned with human rights see media attention and information politics as critical tools for their activism. Yet they found that access to media outlets is much easier in environments with high-quality, pluralistic media markets. However, the results of such activism efforts may be limited to what can be achieved in engaging with human rights violations in various domains. Black et al. (2024) explored this perspective by arguing that audiences support activists, yet the enjoyment audiences get from sporting events makes it easier for them to disavow their complicity that helps reinforce social inequalities while being effective in somewhat minimising the negative impacts associated with hosting such events. Yet it has been proposed that people see sport events perpetuate social, economic, or political inequalities but, as spectators or fans of these events, know that they cannot overcome these issues in relation to sporting events (Black et al., 2024).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as an important issue in international sport event politics. Stakeholders have increasingly pressured organisations involved in

sport events to address concerns linked to CSR. As a part of the CSR agenda, organisations involved in corporate social responsibility issues must consider the human rights implications of their sponsorships. Almahraj (2023) examined a content analysis of press coverage of Saudi Arabia's international sport events in British newspapers that indicated how such actions might lead companies to reevaluate their sponsorship activities or engagements with nations with questionable human rights records. The implications of corporate sponsorships raise questions over whether a company should partner with or publicise their association with sport event organisations in nations with questionable human rights backgrounds (Almahraj, 2023). Jones et al. (2024) explored this dilemma by observing how fans of Newcastle United displayed motivated ignorance regarding their club's ownership developments after their purchase by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund by deliberately avoiding an open discussion on these issues, suggesting that similar hurdles may be faced by companies grappling with these issues. Motivated ignorance might play a role here for stakeholders who want to be able to continue engaging with these entities while not engaging with ethical issues that their support might be seen to be inadvertently facilitating (Black et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2024). International sport event organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), face the persistent challenge of human rights governance accountability. These powerful organisations determine bidding for international sport events but have traditionally favoured commercial considerations over human rights assessments (Boykoff, 2022; Grix & Brannagan, 2024). The IOC's decision to double award Beijing the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics despite documented human rights breaches demonstrates this persistent tendency (Boykoff, 2022). When Beijing submitted its bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics, Chinese officials promised that the event would improve human rights conditions, yet Human Rights Watch revealed that the Chinese government

had used the event to enable human rights abuses (Boykoff, 2022). In their comparative case study of media coverage of the Winter Olympic Games ceremonies in Beijing, Li and Xu (2023) shed light on how state-controlled narratives dominated the narrative about human rights conditions. Critics of human rights governance in sport events call for human rights criteria to be made a significant consideration in the governance of bidding processes and for adequate monitoring mechanisms to be established (Grix & Brannagan, 2024), yet revenue-dependent structural factors in governance inhibit the implementation of such requirements (Wolfe et al., 2025).

Qatar offers one of the most established examples of the use of soft power in sport events and the subsequent sportswashing criticism levelled against the practice. Søyland and Moriconi Bezerra (2022) explored various actors involved in Qatar's multi-actor sport event strategy, analysing the nation's diplomacy, engaging criticism, and legitimisation processes in different sport event sectors. Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) examined the perspectives of international fans on Qatar's acquisition of mega-events, which revealed discontent among fans regarding the discrepancy between Qatar's soft power goals and the actual treatment of migrant workers. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar generated unprecedented international scrutiny. Dubinsky (2022) looked into the cultural clashes at the event, which exposed the first Arab World Cup to intense debates regarding opposing values for gender rights, alcohol, and LGBTQ+ rights. Bettine and Ozdemir (2022) analysed Western media coverage of the event, finding that sportswashing narratives dominated the narratives about the event. In their rigorous experimental study of the event, however, Gerschewski et al. (2024) demonstrated that framing the event in terms of human rights concerns instead of organisational proficiency significantly improved the respondents' attitudes toward Qatar. However, they also found that critical media coverage can inhibit sportswashing efforts but with varying effects on different nations depending on their media structures and attitudes toward Qatar (Gerschewski et al., 2024).

China's utilisation of sport events as part of its geopolitical strategy exemplifies how authoritarian regimes use sport event diplomacy as a component of foreign policy initiatives. Jeong et al. (2024) analysed how sport mega-events contribute uniquely to China's soft power strategy, exploring how the nation leverages events to project images of modernisation, development, and globalisation. Li and Xu (2023) performed a comparative case study on the narratives surrounding the opening and closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, shedding light on how state-controlled narratives varied according to domestic and international audiences. The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics marked the beginning of such promises by Chinese officials who claimed that hosting would improve human rights conditions (Boykoff, 2022). However, they failed to uphold their promise. Author Gouveia (2022) compared the benefits that Macau derives from its strategic use of the Lusophony Games, demonstrating that China utilises various strategies to leverage sport events for geopolitical advantages by strengthening ties between Portuguese-speaking nations as part of its Belt and Road diplomacy initiative. Nicolescu and Barbu (2024) compared the experiences of China and other nations in mega-event hosting and found that countries experience mixed results regarding soft power outcomes, with domestic legitimacy gains from hosting events far outweighing minor reputation gains with international audiences.

Russia's use of the sport event strategy surrounding the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics offers an example of how complex interactions between domestic and international audiences can produce complex outcomes for their sportswashing efforts. Boykoff and McFeely (2025) analysed earlier events but used the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympics as a case study for an exploration of Olympic hosting as a means of soft power and military interventionism, establishing that Olympic events can prepare domestic publics for war. The Sochi Olympics enabled Vladimir Putin to consolidate domestic support while failing to achieve increased international respect despite laws persecuting

LGBTQ+ individuals (Boykoff, 2022). Grix and Kramareva (2017) argued that the Sochi Olympics primarily served a domestic source of soft power rather than merely an external signalling mechanism for Russia's intentions, noting that they only served a dual purpose of fostering patriotic feelings and myths in developing Russia. Wolfe et al. (2025) documented how many Russian citizens took offense at what they viewed as biased Western media coverage and transformed the event into a source of national pride despite significant challenges to overcome regarding human rights issues related to the event. Putin achieved unprecedented levels of popularity after the event, with record-high approval ratings almost nearing 86 per cent (Grix & Kramareva, 2017). However, they invaded and annexed Crimea only months after the event concluded, demonstrating how sport events can prepare domestic publics for military interventions (Boykoff, 2022; Boykoff & McFeely, 2025). The effectiveness of event-based soft power strategies is contested, with evidence of mixed results and a potential for backlash across various contexts. Nicolescu and Barbu (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of the effect of sport mega-events on a country's soft power and found varying degrees of success, depending on the interplay of several factors, such as the country's initial international image, media coverage, and how well it engages with human rights issues. Alshikhy et al. (2023) examined the role of sport mega-events as a means of creating soft power and found that mega-events can result in both positive and negative impacts on the reputation of the event organisers, depending on their response to criticisms raised. Gerschewski et al. (2024) also found that the 2022 Qatar World Cup failed to yield positive impact on the event organiser's reputation, using experimental methods that demonstrated that sportswashing efforts work poorly when human rights issues receive heavy media coverage in ideologically diverse information environments. However, Black et al. (2024) posited the existence of fetishistic disavowal as a more complex response to the use of event-based soft power strategies. The authors argue that, due to a cocktail of factors,

people can be aware of human rights violations yet still choose to be engaged with the events, suggesting that the effectiveness of sportswashing should be evaluated in terms other than changes in attitude toward the event or its organisers. El-Dabt et al. (2023) emphasised the importance of genuine efforts to improve a nation's soft power, as opposed to the initial successes of other nation-branding efforts, which demonstrate the limitations of sportswashing when credibility gaps emerge in public relations.

Saudi Arabia's investment in international sport events has led to years of human rights criticism against the country by its international governing bodies, activists and the media. Almahraj (2023) analysed media coverage of Saudi Arabia from British newspapers and found that such reporting has explicitly framed the association between sport events and human rights violations in terms of sportswashing terminology. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund-funded acquisitions of Newcastle United Football Club, its LIV Golf tournaments, and its boxing and Formula 1 events have all been associated with sportswashing discourse (Black et al., 2024).

The murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul in 2018 marks a turning point in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the countries of the world that have conditioned their view of its sport event investments. Khashoggi's murder at the hands of Saudi agents who were dispatched to Turkey at the behest of their superiors in the highest echelons of the Saudi state has generated widespread condemnation of the country and its activities. The coincidence of many of the country's human rights initiatives in the wake of the murder has led critics of the country to suggest that these efforts have been made in an attempt to divert the world's attention from one of the most brutal regimes in world history (Black et al., 2024). Jones et al. (2024) documented such patterns of motivated ignorance in stakeholders regarding the acquisition of Newcastle United Football Club by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. Stakeholders in the club have faced questions regarding whether their involvement in events supported by Saudi

athletes has made them complicit in a regime that executes individuals without due course to non-lethal acts (Black et al., 2024).

The responses of athletes to Saudi Arabia's investments in the sport industry vary widely, sometimes even within the same organisation, thus reflecting some of the complexities people face when addressing ethical dilemmas in globalised sporting events. Some athletes have made public statements rejecting involvement in events staged in Saudi Arabia due to human rights concerns, while others have chosen to ignore such debate and accepted contracts from the country's organisations. Jones et al. (2024) found that a majority of Newcastle United fans displayed motivated ignorance by refusing to engage with political debates on the club's involvement with Saudi Arabian entities. Black et al. (2024) interpret this pattern of behaviour from diverse stakeholders in these organisations as an example of fetishistic disavowal allowing individuals to acknowledge the event-based soft power strategies implemented by Saudi athletes while continuing to benefit from the lucrative rewards associated with these institutions. Gender rights and LGBTQ+ issues are particularly salient dimensions of the criticism of Saudi Arabia's sport event investments, intersecting with more general analysis of the potential for sport events to facilitate progressive social change. AlKhalifa and Farello (2021) examined the soft power of Arab women's football, analysing changes in perception and legitimacy construction through social media, offering insights into how engagement with a sport event programme can relate to gender politics in conservative societies. The study reveals that while Saudi Arabia's recent reforms allowing women to participate in sport events, by attending and participating in competition in available sports, have been promoted by the Kingdom as an indicator of progressing social norms, where critics frame these reforms as insufficient (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021; Almahraj, 2023). Laws in Saudi Arabia that punish same-sex relationships while failing to protect the rights of LGBTQ+

individuals create tensions with hosting international sport events with diverse participants and spectators (Almahraj, 2023).

These conditions create the potential that sport events may act as a space for transformative change but also suggest that these events may only act as a means of legitimising regimes with a history of promoting discriminatory policies (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021). The limited nature of these reforms suggests that sport event investments have more value as a means of reputation management than genuinely contributing to human rights conditions (Almahraj, 2023; Gerschewski et al., 2024).

Counter-narratives and resistance movements have emerged to combat Saudi Arabia's use of sport event investments for reputation management, demonstrating that sportswashing efforts create counter-mobilisation that can either partially or totally undermine the benefits created for the reputation of these regimes. Human rights groups have organised campaigns during major Saudi events, using high visibility from event organisers to publicise statistics on prisoners, execution rates, and other forms of regime oppression (Almahraj, 2023). Activist groups have called for boycotts, targeting sponsors for withdrawing financial backing, and calling upon participants to disengage (Black et al., 2024). Empirical analysis by Gerschewski et al. (2024) indicates that the impact of these groups on limiting the effectiveness of sportswashing efforts varies according to media coverage quality and the structure of public discourse in receiving countries with more pluralistic media ecosystems better equipped to respond to counter-narratives. Black et al. (2024) suggest that even where effective, counter-narratives create an environment where audiences can acknowledge the efforts of these groups while still engaging with sport events by utilising the mechanisms of fetishistic disavowal.

An evaluation of the soft power efforts made by Saudi Arabia through its sportswashing activities, as well as limitations, require considering multiple dimensions and audiences when analysing the outcomes created by this practice for varying audiences. El-Dabt et

al. (2023) suggest that audiences observing the efforts of Saudi Arabia to build commercial ties with foreign countries perceive its investment in sport events as meaningful. Yet analysis of British newspaper coverage by Almahraj (2023) suggests that audiences bearing a concern for human rights issues view the same efforts as having the potential to legitimise the regime's efforts to launder its reputation. Experimental research conducted by Gerschewski et al. (2024) indicates that the effectiveness of sportswashing efforts is determined by framing the events in their marketing materials; more negative attitudes toward the hosting nation emerge when presented with a critical framing of the events, but not when using neutral or positive framing. Internationally, sport event investments may have mixed impacts. Nation-building efforts may be underway in Saudi Arabia, and investing in sport events may create a sense of national pride among its youth (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021). Black et al. (2024) suggest that audiences aware of human rights abuses being facilitated by these sport events creates a space for engagement with these events on their own terms despite recognising the issues created by participating in or engaging with them through the mechanisms of fetishistic disavowal. Yet a comparative analysis performed by Nicolescu and Barbu (2024) indicates that there is no universal formula for creating a positive impact on international perceptions regarding a nation's soft power resources from hosting a single mega-event, such as the FIFA World Cup or Olympics. Still, they provide insight into factors that mitigate the tensions created by competing demands from various audiences. Finally, comparative analyses with other nations indicate that much more needs to be done before researchers can make definitive conclusions about the long-term impact of Saudi sport event investments on their international reputation, domestic politics, or human rights conditions (Almahraj, 2023; Gerschewski et al., 2024).

2.6. Theoretical Framework

2.6.1. Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004)

Nye (2004)'s framework of soft power is the most prominent theoretical framework linking sport events to enhanced international power relationships. Soft power is defined as the ability to get others to like you, whereas hard power refers to coercion or monetary payments. The soft power of a nation relates to aspects like culture, political ideas, or foreign policies that others consider to be valid (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Nye, 2004). The projection of soft power via sport events utilises the attraction and appeal of a nation to influence other nations' behaviours or decisions (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Sport events serve as unique vehicles for the projection of soft power because they possess distinct characteristics (Grix, 2012; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). For instance, sport events attract numerous fans, they can be watched for an extended period, and they create a platform for the nation hosting them to present itself in its best light to the world (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Shahid et al., 2025). The Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups are two of the most prominent sport events, attracting billions of fans worldwide. The nations hosting them gain tremendous visibility for their nations and the projects or features they present as worthy of admiration (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Li & Xu, 2023). This visibility is not limited to the actual sporting contest but extends to the culture presented, infrastructure showcased, and organisational skills used to manage the event (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018; Knott et al., 2016). The emotional attachment fans develop for sport events further enhances their value as tools for projecting soft power. Memories created from sporting events can take years to shift, often affecting fans' perceptions of the nation associated with such events (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Shahid et al., 2025).

However, other researchers have examined limitations or problems in the sport event-soft power relationship (Ludvigsen, 2021). For example, Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) offer a new perspective by suggesting that we should refer to this process as the soft

power-soft disempowerment nexus. They contend that sporting event investments are likely to generate backlash and negative attention when used to hide problematic domestic policies in a nation or to divert attention from human rights abuses. The contemporary concept used to refer to this challenge in sporting events is sportswashing, which threatens to undermine nations that use events to improve their reputations (Ludvigsen, 2021). Sportswashing creates particular problems for nations seeking to use events to enhance their international reputation, as they are often viewed as deserving of condemnation and warranting further investigation (Al-Emadi et al., 2017; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). In such cases, the sporting event may be more likely to attract adverse publicity than positive evaluations, as activists, the media, and civil society organisations ensure that there is sufficient attention given to highlight the contradictions between the image promoted and realities at home (Almahraj, 2023; Ludvigsen, 2021).

The value created by using a sport event to project soft power only affects the nation if it is credible and based on an authentic representation of that nation's international position (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). In situations where a nation enjoys relatively favourable views from most of the world, a single event may not be sufficient to create a sense of enhanced international standing, as their views of the nation are merely reinforced (Grix, 2012; Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018). However, in cases where nations have an unfavourable standing with many of the world's nations, their sporting investment may create a contested narrative that compares adverse information shared about events occurring in one country with the more positive information shared about the sporting event itself (Almahraj, 2023; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). The increased availability of digital platforms creates challenges that were previously not possible to overcome by forces opposing the development of these narratives, as anyone opposing the narrative of an event can create an alternative narrative or share information that may tarnish the event in the eyes of its fans (Alnasser et al., 2024; Li & Xu, 2023).

2.6.2. Critical Discourse Theory (Fairclough, 1992)

In addition to soft power theory, a relevant and necessary application of critical discourse theory is essential. Based on the writing of Fairclough (1992, 2003) and developments by Wodak and Meyer (2009), critical discourse theory holds that language is a tool for creating, reaffirming, and contesting power relations. Fairclough (1992) emphasises that discourse (uses of language) produces (and thus reflects) social realities, making language an ontological construct of identity, relationships and systems of knowledge. In the context of sport events, this means that the naming, framing and narration of such events across all media, publications and public comment does create a political meaning (Daoudi et al., 2025).

Critical discourse theory can specifically be focused on in the context of the sport event dispute, as it asks which actors in such disputed events manipulate language strategically to create readings that favour their framing of the hosting of the event and to disqualify the reading of other actors from being heard (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In the context of the sportswashing accusation, for example, the framing of hosting is not only and not even primarily an issue of a label – it is a label that is itself based on a story that makes hosting inherently illegitimate. The official framing of the hosting by the nations/regions that sponsor such events, however, tends to stress other readings of the hosting, such as the idea of giving rise to development, modernisation and economic growth. Critical discourse theory enables an analysis of the structure, voice and ideology of competing discourses in disputed events such as this one (Fairclough, 2003; Ahmad & Al-Zoubi, 2025). This is especially relevant in regions where events such as the Dakar Rally take place, where Western media, regional media, official representatives and even social media commentators generate readings that are worlds apart from one another regarding the same event, defining not only what happened but with what implications this happened (Daoudi et al., 2025; Zhang & Tang, 2024).

2.6.3. Significance of this Combination

The combination of soft power theory and critical discourse theory offers a number of analytic strengths that are not evident in either theory employed in isolation. Soft power theory (Nye 2004; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018) provides the macro-level analysis of the goals of the host country in seeking to create its international appeal, legitimacy and power through cultural and symbolic means by hosting international sport events. Critical discourse theory provides the micro-level analysis of the language use in media and digital texts that mediates these relations. These are the ways in which framing functions as a power act, the ways in which resistive narratives challenge dominant narratives, and the ways in which audiences respond (in digital spaces) to discourse in ways that reproduce or challenge dominant narratives (Fairclough 1992; Manor 2019; Sanderson et al. 2016). The combination of the two theories enables an analysis that encompasses the strategic goals of sport event diplomacy as well as the use of language as a mechanism for exercising and challenging power. This combination of theories is particularly well-suited to research into a contested case like Saudi Arabia, where there is a large gap between the official soft power narratives and critical discourse (Brannagan & Giulianotti 2018; Skey 2023; Wolfe et al. 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Chapter Preview

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach employed to investigate Saudi Arabia's use of sport events for international image projection and soft power. The chapter details the research paradigm, specific methods employed (netnography and document analysis), data collection strategies, sampling approach, and analytical techniques. Additionally, it discusses the trustworthiness and ethical considerations that guided the research process.

The qualitative methodological approach was selected because it enables in-depth examination of how meaning is constructed within media narratives and digital discourse surrounding Saudi Arabia's sporting event investments. This approach is well-suited to addressing the research questions, which seek to understand not just 'what' narratives exist, but 'how' they are constructed, by whom, and with what rhetorical strategies.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Philosophical Positioning

The research uses the interpretivist research paradigm as its foundation. This research paradigm explains that social reality is constructed by interactions between individuals when people establish meaning through their conversations and their interpretive activities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivism perspective is well suited to the research topic of media representation because it examines how people create and contest meaning systems within their political and social spheres (Schwandt, 2015).

The research's ontological framework is based on constructivism because the concept of soft power, national image and legitimacy develops through the discursive processes that text, language, and symbolic elements create for media. This perspective supports (Gergen, 2015) when he argued that social reality is derived from the activities of creating and interpreting a shared sense of meaning among a group of individuals. The research

uses a subjectivist epistemology because it acknowledges that the knowledge that builds its arguments about Saudi Arabia's sport strategy is developed from individual text interpretation rather than individual observation of external events or phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Contextual meaning is established by the media institution, state actor or audience member when they create the meaning of the text through their specific and unique discursive practices within their specific context or setting.

This study utilises two complementary theoretical frameworks, Soft Power Theory and Critical Discourse Theory, as its philosophical framework for scrutinising Saudi Arabia's sport strategy. The soft power theory of Nye (2004), which forms the basis of this study's theoretical framework, provides a structure for exploring how states adapt to changes in their international positions through their use of attraction rather than coercion. This attraction being the primary means through which states adapt to changes in their position towards them by using sport as the means of applying this theory as the primary event that will be utilised to alter the position of the international observer towards a particular state. The critical discourse theory of Fairclough (1995, 2001) and Wodak and Meyer (2016), provides a framework for understanding how language represents social power relationships and how dominant social groups produce legitimate dominant narratives for other social groups. These theories in combination enable the researcher to make sense of the ideological function of the narratives developed by the Saudi Arabia event strategy, and how those narratives contribute towards creating an imaginary construct of reform in the geopolitical contest taking place between its international rivals over their national reputations. These theories directly relate to the method used in this research study. It is an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach that allows for the uncovering of the development of narratives with certain ideological meanings through discourse that produces specific interpretations of events while blocking other perspectives, thus

developing the interpretation that informs this study which is used to make sense of the data.

3.3 Research Methodology

3.3.1 Qualitative Research

The research employs qualitative approach to derive insights from a body of secondary media data. Qualitative approaches are better suited to the study of complex phenomena like media narratives as they enable researchers to trace the development of a narrative that has formed and been disseminated by its participants who pay attention to the meaning, symbolism, and contextual elements that underpin its evolution (Bryman, 2016). The study analyses how Saudi Arabian sports programme presenters use public facing media as a communication channel, as opposed to looking at how well they run their operations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The research is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm as its focus is on how Western journalists, regional news agencies and the online public contests, creates, and reinforces the relevance of Saudi sports investment funding through their use of the media as a communication tool.

3.3.2 Netnography

The study employs netnography as a research methodology for the section of the dataset that comprises YouTube videos and their comments. Netnography is a research methodology that Kozinets (2002) developed using ethnographic techniques to study members of online communities who interact via digital media. Netnography allows researchers to study data available as content on online platforms because it enables researchers to study online data without requiring interactions with physical participants (Kozinets, 2002). The netnography research methodology that Kozinets and Gambetti (2020) described yields powerful results using a research design that requires less time spent in the field than traditional ethnographic research projects.

The netnography research methodology applies to this study because users of online platforms can express their genuine feelings without encumbrance, yielding authentic data regarding the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of the public that cannot be uncovered using standard research methodologies (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). The YouTube comments section for sporting events in Saudi Arabia feature comments from viewers worldwide who belong to diverse nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and political affiliations. The netnographic analysis of these comments enabled research into an unfiltered expression of the views of regular members of the public regarding how they interpret the given social narratives relating to Saudi sport event development. This research methodology also aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which regards online comments as an important representation and driver of social narratives that underpin the interpretation of Saudi sport event development strategies by users of online platforms. Based on this, a netnographic analysis of the YouTube data will be conducted, as discussed in the appropriate section of the study. However, the study will also employ document analysis as a further research methodology for the written media texts.

3.3.3 Document Analysis

In addition to netnography, document analysis serves as a systematic qualitative analysis of the written media articles that complete the dataset for this study. Document analysis involves the collection, selection, appraisal and synthesis of data from documents (Bowen, 2009), and is widely accepted as a valid approach to qualitative research using publicly available secondary data, such as news articles, opinion pieces and institutional publications. In this case, document analysis is applied to the set of news articles from Western media and regional media outlets that were collected to capture contrasting geopolitical interpretations of Saudi Arabia's sport event strategy.

Each document is treated as a discursive artefact; not as a source of information, but as a text that embodies a specific perspective, ideology and narrative strategy. The analysis

procedure involves close reading of each article and recording framing decisions, language usage, cited sources and any included or excluded themes such as sportswashing, reform, human rights and national legitimacy. This approach conforms to the framework of Critical Discourse Theory that underlies analysis of the YouTube comments data, focusing on the interrelationship between language, power and social context (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Thus, document analysis provides the systematic text-based complement to the netnographic analysis of YouTube comments, forming the basis for the thematic analysis that is presented in the next section.

3.4 Data

The research data consists of 20 Western news articles and 20 Regional news articles, as well as 20 YouTube videos and 18,077 comments on from the videos, from 2016 to 2025. The research design enables the researcher to evaluate how different geopolitical perspectives, media platforms, public, and institutional communications create unique narrative patterns.

The Western news sources include BBC News, CBC News, CNN, CBS News, CNBC, The Guardian, NBC Sports, Al Jazeera, The New York Times, Forbes, Sky Sports, and SportsPro. The researcher selected these sources as they provide an international perspective and are well-known and credible sources of news, enabling researchers to evaluate how Saudi sports coverage is reported using critical journalism lenses for sportswashing and geopolitical angles. The primary sources for regional news include Arab News and the Saudi Gazette, as they are English-language news agencies based in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Region. These sources demonstrate how regional sporting events present their projects' development within Vision 2030 storylines in their reporting. The use of Western and regional sources in this research enables the researchers to assess how different geopolitical media systems function.

YouTube is the sole social media platform included in this research as it allows users to access broadcast content and create video discussions that users can share. The researcher has evaluated 20 YouTube videos that consist of investigative journalism from The New York Times and news reports from CBS News and Sky News, promotional content for WWE events and DAZN Boxing, and regional perspectives from Sky News Arabia and SSC Sports.

3.4.1 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select materials, with a focus on analytical diversity across Western critical perspectives, regional celebratory narratives, and hybrid social media discourse (Patton, 2015). This strategy enabled sampling that accounted for diverse geopolitical perspectives, media formats (print journalism, broadcast news, digital video, and social media), and discourse positions spanning official narratives, investigative journalism, promotional content, and public engagement. Sources were eligible for inclusion in the study if they explicitly referenced Saudi Arabia's role in sport and engaged substantively with related topics, such as reputation management, legitimacy contestations, economic diversification, social reform, or human rights issues.

Within the purposive sampling framework, a maximum variation sampling approach was adopted to ensure a broad range of perspectives and framings (Palinkas et al., 2015). Sources were therefore purposefully selected to reflect a wide range of perspectives, such as pairing a critical Guardian investigation of sportswashing with a celebratory Arab News piece on Vision 2030 achievements or selecting an official WWE promotional video for a Saudi Arabia-hosted event alongside an investigative New York Times documentary on the same events. Sampling was guided by a desire for analytical depth and richness in discourse rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with established qualitative research and interpretivist assumptions underlying this study. The final dataset of 60 sources covers enough to identify dominant, contested, and negotiated

narratives around sportswashing while remaining analytically coherent. This is consistent with the procedures adopted in thematic analysis, where the focus is on depth rather than breadth, with saturation guiding data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.4.2 Data Collection

Data was obtained using targeted keyword searching and manual acquisition from the identified media sources and YouTube, over the period of 2016 to 2025, which corresponds with the announcement of Vision 2030 and the subsequent ramp up of Saudi Arabia's engagement in global sport. Search terms included 'Saudi Arabia sport,' 'Vision 2030,' 'sportswashing,' 'soft power,' 'LIV Golf,' 'Newcastle United,' 'WWE Saudi Arabia,' 'Cristiano Ronaldo Al-Nassr,' 'Formula 1 Jeddah,' and 'Turki Alalshikh,' as well as additional event- or athlete-related search terms as available.

For newspaper articles, this involved navigating the archives of the targeted media outlets via their websites or online news databases. Articles were retrieved based on their relevance to the search queries, as well as their publication dates. The articles were screened in a two-stage process: the first stage involved screening headlines and abstracts, and the second stage involved the full-text reading of the articles that met the inclusion criteria. Each retrieved article was saved, and its bibliographic data was systematically recorded. For YouTube, the searches were designed to target news segments, press conferences, investigative reports, and other event-related coverage of Saudi Arabia's sporting initiatives. Videos were screened based on the credibility of their channels, their viewership numbers, and their relevance to the topic at hand. Transcripts of the YouTube videos were obtained using YouTube's automatic captioning tool, with additional transcription efforts performed as required. Comment sections were retrieved using YouTube Data API v3 scripts in Python, which allowed for systematic and large-scale comment acquisition while preserving important metadata such as the username of the commenting user, timestamps, like counts, and reply threading. The comment sections

were exported from YouTube in CSV format and imported into NVivo 15 for analysis. The final comment dataset contained 18,077 individual comments across the 20 targeted YouTube videos. All acquired data was organised in a structured file system using consistent naming conventions to enable easy management and cross-referencing during the analysis process.

Table 1 summarises the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to all sources in the dataset and Appendix A clearly categorises the media sources into western media and regional media which helps understand the lens through which the comparative analysis was done.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Media Outlet Type	Recognised international news outlets (Western); established regional outlets in Saudi Arabia/Gulf (Arab News, Saudi Gazette); official sports organisation channels (WWE, DAZN); investigative journalism outlets	Unverified sources; personal blogs or opinion sites; platforms without editorial standards; sources lacking journalistic credibility
Content Relevance	Direct engagement with Saudi Arabia's sporting investments; substantive analytical or investigative content; coverage of Vision 2030 sport initiatives; discussion of sportswashing, soft power, or legitimacy	Basic event reporting without analysis; content unrelated to Saudi sport strategy; purely promotional material without discursive framing; advertisement-only content

Platform (social media)	YouTube videos and associated comment sections; videos from news organisations, official sports channels, investigative journalism	Other social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram); videos from personal channels without editorial oversight
Time Period	Published between 2016–2025; corresponds with Vision 2030 announcement and implementation	Content published before 2016; historical coverage predating current Saudi sport strategy
Format	News articles (print/online); video content (YouTube); public comments (YouTube); allows for multi-format discourse analysis	Paywalled content inaccessible for analysis; multimedia formats incompatible with discourse analysis
Engagement Quality	Western sources: critical, investigative, or analytical framing; regional sources: celebratory, developmental, or Vision 2030-aligned narratives; social media: substantive user engagement and commentary	Sources with minimal engagement; comment sections with fewer than 10 substantive comments; videos with limited discursive value

3.5 Thematic Analysis

The researcher employed Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) thematic analysis as the primary analytical technique for their research. Thematic analysis proved to be the research method of choice for this study as it allows scientists to use inductive and deductive coding approaches to achieve analytical rigour and methodological precision (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Thematic analysis allows researchers to use their active data engagement as a

methodological tool instead of being constrained by pre-determined coding processes. The researcher engaged with the data using their soft power theory and critical discourse theory framework while allowing new insights to emerge from the texts. The researcher employed NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software to perform their analysis, which helped them systematically retrieve all 60 sources and 18,077 comments and compare them using their systematic retrieval capabilities. The analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) six-phase framework, which provided structure to the analysis. The first phase of the analytical process is familiarisation with the data, which involved active, repeated reading of all 60 sources across Western and regional news outlets, YouTube transcripts, and the 18,077-comment dataset. The researcher documented all recurring patterns and tensions in the data that demonstrated the significant variation in Western media coverage of Newcastle United's acquisition by PIF through sportswashing compared to Arab News coverage of the deal as a triumph. The initial analysis of comment data revealed a range of views that made it challenging to separate relevant comments from promotional content using basic binary evaluations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher performed line-by-line coding across the entire dataset in the second phase of analysis using inductive and deductive coding processes that guided the analysis with the study's theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher employed six code categories across the study that included 'economic diversification narrative,' 'sportswashing accusation,' 'reform and modernisation framing,' 'human rights criticism,' 'public scepticism,' and 'Western media bias allegation.' The 60 sources provided initial codes that reflected all the different meanings and positions expressed in Western journalism, regional coverage on YouTube, and by commentators on the platform.

The third phase of the analytical process involves combining codes into candidate themes that demonstrate wider meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The analysis revealed

that some codes relating to economic diversification, tourism, and infrastructure development formed one theme, which would be referred to as Economic Justification for Sporting Investment. The codes related to accusations of sportswashing, reputation laundering, and distractions from human rights issues formed one cluster that would be referred to as legitimacy challenges. The NVivo software platform provided the researcher with thematic mapping tools that allowed for visual evaluations of the groupings and the reorganisation of group structures during the analytical process.

The fourth phase of the analytical process involves ensuring that each theme is tested against the coded data to ensure that it has sufficient thematic coherence and analytical strength (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher eliminated any themes that did not have sufficient evidence in the data or those that were redundant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial theme related to media bias was deemed too broad as it appeared in various forms in Western self-criticism of its coverage of Newcastle United's acquisition, Arab News's counter-narrative, and in YouTube comment discussions. Thus, it required sub-narratives needing to be distinguished as separate analytical patterns. Internal homogeneity within themes and external heterogeneity between them were assessed iteratively throughout the analytical process.

The fifth phase of the analytical process involves assigning specific written definitions to each theme that clarify their boundaries and relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher assigned names that had analytical value rather than descriptive value for content. The name assigned to the cluster that encompassed both the accusation of sportswashing and its subsequent definition by reformers around the world is referred to as Sportswashing and Legitimacy Contestation. The definition assigned to this cluster clarifies its unique contribution to understanding this phenomenon. The sixth phase required that the researcher synthesise its analyses into thematic narratives which comprise of thematic narratives and representative quotes from all three tiers of the media.

The researcher then selected quotes that demonstrate the progression of each theme across information channels rather than focusing on a specific news story or media outlet (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The results of the study are presented in themes that demonstrates the different geopolitical perspectives and media outlets taken to narrate the same sporting events. The study employed temporal analysis to assess how each theme developed in relation to significant events like the Khashoggi affair, LIV Golf controversy, and WrestleMania 43 announcement all of which took place between 2016 and 2025.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Researcher trustworthiness development requires them to establish credibility, transferability, maintain dependability and confirmability according to Lincoln et al. (1985).

The research establishes credibility through its extended data analysis which includes multiple readings and iterative coding. It also uses multiple perspectives from Western, regional and public discourse and shows all analytical choices made during the study. The Braun and Clarke six-phase framework receives systematic implementation which maintains methodological rigour throughout the analytical process.

The research supports transferability through its detailed description of the study environment and participant selection methods and data analysis techniques which help readers determine how the results can be used in different sport-based soft power and media discourse settings.

The researcher maintains dependability through complete documentation of their data collection and analysis process which includes their use of NVivo 15 to track all coding choices and thematic development throughout the entire dataset.

The researcher uses reflexivity to establish confirmability because they recognise how their personal position affects their ability to understand the data. The author who researches politically sensitive matters about human rights and geopolitical competition and disputed reform perspectives makes sure to recognise possible prejudices while working to present all relevant viewpoints equally. Researchers need to assess their personal background and their first impressions and theoretical beliefs at all research stages because these factors influence their interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research uses publicly available data, and does not involve direct human subjects, so accordingly, there was no requirement for formal ethical approval. Yet there is an ethical obligation associated with the conduct of research. Efforts were made to avoid any misrepresentation or mis-contextualising of media texts, to treat YouTube comments as discursive texts rather than as personal accounts or statements, and to be aware of the political connotations involved in referencing concepts like human rights, government and governance, and international relations. Commenters have been identified by their publicly visible usernames where it has been necessary to do so, but efforts have not been made to locate individuals beyond information that is available to the public. Data has been handled in accordance with standards of research integrity. Such steps are consistent with those outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017) and the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2015).

4. Findings

4.1. Chapter Preview

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of media narratives, digital discourse, and strategic documents surrounding Saudi Arabia's sport events investments. Drawing on data collected from diverse sources (Western news media, regional outlets, social media platforms, and Saudi state publications), the findings reveal four interconnected mechanisms through which Saudi Arabia employs sport events to project national image and exercise soft power.

The findings are organized around four key themes: (1) Sport events and national image projection, examining how Saudi Arabia strategically uses specific sporting events for nation branding; (2) Media narratives and digital discourse dynamics, revealing how different audiences interpret these investments; (3) Vision 2030 integration and differentiated effectiveness, showing how sport events connect to broader development strategy; and (4) Operationalization and contestation of sportswashing and soft power, exploring competing frameworks for understanding Saudi Arabia's strategic deployment of sport.

4.2 Sport events and national image projection

The results reveal several mechanisms through which Saudi Arabia utilised sporting events in shaping its international image, thereby rebranding itself as a modern state.

The mechanisms work simultaneously in the broader contexts of shaping its domestic identity, building its global prestige, developing cultural authenticity, and normalising itself through diversity.

4.2.1 Nation-Building and Identity

Sport events can be seen as emotionally salient arenas in which domestic and diaspora audiences enact and reinforce national identity. This conceptual model understands sport hosting as a national achievement with emotional salience, irrespective of external judgment. Domestic audiences clearly expressed their sense of ownership through their association of sporting achievement with Saudi national identity. A viewer commented on the YouTube video of the Turki Alalshikh (Chairman of the General Entertainment Authority and advisor to the Royal Court) interview on the GEA/Riyadh Season channel:

We dream and achieve! We are so proud that were Saudi and so proud of him and grateful for what he's doing! (@joudvvv, 2024)

Pride narratives were also extended into official Saudi discourse, where hosting was presented as an achievement in line with Vision 2030. During the announcement of the Fury-Usyk fight in Saudi Arabia, Turki Alalshikh, Chair of the General Entertainment Authority and Advisor to the Royal Court, declared:

I can't tell you how proud I am to be able to deliver to the market the best fight as part of Vision 2030 in our country. (Turki Alalshikh, 2024)

Diaspora audiences also exhibited similar values in their understanding of identity, which saw Saudi Arabia's hosting as a form of collective acknowledgment. In the YouTube comment section for the Sami Zayn Arabic promo video, a user commented:

As an Arab, this made me so happy just realizing that my childhood and as a WWE fan to this is amazing. Couldnt be more proud 🙌🙌🙌. (@Hash_kw, 2024)

4.2.2 Spectacle and Prestige

Saudi Arabia always used large-scale events, celebrity recruitment, and broadcast-quality production to signal organisational capacity and create parity with established sporting nations. The recruitment of global icons was the key mechanism for sending the prestige signal. Fortune magazine's reporting on the transfer of Cristiano Ronaldo to Al Nassr was noted for:

Cristiano Ronaldo signed a 2 1/2-year contract with Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr. In signing Ronaldo, a household name with more than 500 million social media followers, Saudi Arabia is boosting its presence in the biggest sports. (Tong et al., 2022)

Furthermore, the recruitment of celebrities was not limited to football and dived into the world of boxing, where production standards were used as an additional measure of prestige. The New York Times coverage of the Saudi Arabia boxing calendar stated that:

Saudi Arabia appears to have chosen the biggest and most important boxing events. The stadiums are world class and the production quality rivals anything in Las Vegas or London. (D'Urso, 2024)

Such production standards were also recognised by international audiences, who saw the dedication that Saudi Arabia had put into hosting world-class sporting events. This is evident from a comment on the YouTube video of the Turki Alalshikh interview, which said:

My respect too Turki Alalshikh for saving the sport of boxing for the big fights for everyone too see 🔥 🔥 🔥 . (@Lameahhboi9393, 2024)

4.2.3 Cultural Authenticity

Cultural authenticity is a dimension that emerged specifically within sport hosting in Saudi, with moments that saw authentic cultural expression create emotional involvement beyond the boundaries of commodified spectacle. A YouTube comment on Sami Zayn's Arabic promo said:

It was a genuine beautiful pop when Sami started speaking his language. Although I didnt understand. I could feel the emotion. Hats off to him & WWE for providing that special moment to those great fans!! (@jeffbartko3401,2024)

This moment elicited a profound reaction from the audience, as the promotional material was viewed as a declaration of cultural pride and linguistic representation in the global arena. The audience's reaction was highlighted in another YouTube comment on the Sami Zayn Arabic promo video.

0:44 flag of Palestine, and an Arab man united with his people and speaking his language for the first time, this moment is priceless and emotional. We are proud of you, Sami. (@APlaceWhereWeBelong, 2024)

Audience responses from outside the Arab community further validated this cultural representation, demonstrating how authentic moments transcend targeted demographics.

A Canadian viewer commented on the Sami Zayn Arabic promo video:

Im Canadian and very well aware of Zayn's heritage and this makes me happy he could do this and so proud of WWE for not hiding this and celebrating the diversity in culture. Much love (@mjking8704, 2024)

4.2.4 Multi-Sport Event Strategy

Saudi Arabia's sports event strategy was marked by the simultaneous acquisition of sports events ranging from boxing, wrestling, golf, football, and motorsport, thus ensuring the sustained global presence and the normalisation of Saudi Arabia as the default host country. The New York Times' reporting on the portfolio approach said:

Saudi Arabia has moved aggressively into global sports, hosting major boxing matches, launching the LIV Golf series, recruiting football superstars like Ronaldo and Benzema, and securing WWE events including WrestleMania. The breadth of investment is unprecedented. (D'Urso, 2024)

This normalisation effect was explicitly acknowledged by the audiences, who saw the role that Saudi Arabia had been playing in reviving global boxing. This is evident from a YouTube comment on the Turki Alalshikh interview video that said:

This man is going to make every fight that Boxing and fight fans always dream of a reality, He is the Saviour of Boxing. (@TripleA679, 2024)

4.3 Media narratives and digital discourse

The findings suggests that there are three different types of media environments that shape Saudi sport investments in fundamentally different ways. The Western institutional media environment predominantly presents the sport investment in the sportswashing frame, while the regional environment predominantly presents the sport investment in the development/achievement frame, and the digital public spheres are contested spaces in which the two dominant frames are being contested.

4.3.1 Western Sportswashing and Human rights Frame

A dominant interpretive frame is used by Western institutional media outlets in constructing and presenting Saudi Arabia's investments in sport events. This frame makes the accusation of sportswashing sound obvious, and it pre-emptively discredits the legitimacy of Saudi sporting activities, portraying them as a calculated attempt at diversion from human rights abuses rather than a positive step towards development. In an interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia and the main creator of Vision 2030, said:

Well, if sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by way of 1%, I will continue doing sportswashing. (Richardson, 2023)

This statement was reported across Western media outlets. CNBC coverage of LIV Golf stated:

Critics of LIV have accused PIF of 'sportswashing' by using the league to distract from the kingdom's history of human rights violations. (Rizzo, 2023)

The human rights frame was consistent throughout the audience, and the commenters used the discourse of human rights to challenge the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia. A YouTube comment on a video regarding the murder of Jamal Khashoggi stated:

Its freedom of speech...and he was a journalist. That's his right, but in Saudi Arabia there is no freedom of speech or human rights. (@Rosie_88, 2021)

4.3.2 Regional Development Narratives

The promotional framing that is used by Saudi Arabian regional media outlets in the presentation of Saudi sport event investments is focused on the aspects of national achievement, economic modernisation, and regional pride, as opposed to the aspects of

human rights concern. The aspects that are promoted in the coverage by the Arab News on the sport strategy in Saudi Arabia include the following:

Vision 2030 has opened new opportunities in the sports industry for international competitions, inward investments and local tourism. (Al-Ghalayini, 2018)

Regional media analysis was dominated by economic indicators and GDP contributions. In reporting on economic issues, Arab News quoted Turki Alalshikh, Chairman of the General Entertainment Authority, and adviser at the Royal Court, as saying:

We are so proud of the team's achievement. This achievement served as a testament to the GSA's mission to create an environment where sports can thrive. (Arab News, 2023)

The emphasis on organisational capacity and national pride recurred across multiple event types. Arab News coverage of women's sport stated:

This is wonderful news for the progress of the women's game in the Kingdom, and we must also not forget the Saudi Sports For All Women's Football League, which was contested last year. (Tannoury, 2021)

4.3.3 Digital Public Contestation

Digital public contestation on YouTube operated as a multivocal arena where diverse audiences affirmed Saudi sporting investments. A YouTube comment on the Turki Alalshikh interview video stated:

Respect and support for Turki Alalshikh and Saudi Arabia for what they are doing! (@MUSICUNEEED, 2024)

Whataboutism was a recurring counter strategy in these digital spaces, directly challenging the selective application of the Human Rights label. A YouTube comment on a FIFA Women's World Cup video stated:

Violence is all countries. What about Russia? Is US safe country?
(@lifewithatif1974, 2024)

Regional pride narratives ran parallel to these contestations, with Muslim and diaspora commenters affirming the cultural significance of Arab representation in global entertainment. A YouTube comment on the Sami Zayn Arabic promo video stated:

As a Muslim who is been a fan of @WWE for so long, happy to hear our Islamic greeting opened in Monday Night Raw. Thank you @Samy Zayn for making us proud. (@Ibrahim-Aar, 2024)

4.3.4 Alternative Modernities

There was a unique discursive formation that constructed Saudi Arabia's development path in a manner that was legitimate, self-determined, and a vision of modernity that did not need or seek any approval or endorsement from the West. This construction was based on the idea that modernity could be achieved through positive, culturally affirming paths, in direct opposition to Western liberal democratic ideals of what was necessary or universal in achieving modernity.

The notion of alternative paths of development emerged as a recurring theme in the digital spaces, with the development trajectory in Saudi Arabia being referred to as different from that in the West. In the comment section on YouTube, in a video discussing MBS's comment on sportswashing, it was stated:

Saudi Arabia is a fabulous country. I dream of visiting her. Saudi Arabia is the heart of the world. We should all love this extraordinary kingdom. I am from

Bulgaria and I read a lot about this world from the future. A world of kindness and understanding. Respect and respect. I am about to visit this country (@IvayloPetrovOFFICIAL, 2023)

Such dismissal of Western normative frameworks was seen repeatedly in different digital spaces, where commenters reiterated Saudi Arabia's prerogative in pursuing development in its own parameters. A YouTube comment on a video regarding Ronaldo's acquisition by Al-Nassr Football Club stated:

cry more, saudi is getting the growth in gdp , development in their football sector and huge growth in their views. (@glovesgam315, 2023)

4.4 Vision 2030 integration and differentiated effectiveness

This theme focuses on the structural integration of the investment in sports events within the framework for economic diversification set by Vision 2030, and its differentiated effectiveness for domestic and western audience.

4.4.1 Structural Economic Embedding

Saudi Arabia's economy is traditionally based on oil revenue, with a significant percentage of its revenue and GDP derived from petroleum products. However, with the volatile nature of the oil market and the global move towards renewable energy, the country has strategically positioned itself towards economic diversification, with sport events, tourism, and international investment highlighted as key elements of this strategy. The inclusion of sport investment within formally structured policy frameworks is complemented with quantified measures of GDP and tourism projections. BBC on Vision 2030 states as follows:

The Vision 2030 plan would ensure we can live without oil by 2020. Among the reforms announced were steps to diversify the economy, including investment in mineral mining and expanding military production. ('Saudi Arabia Agrees Plans to Move Away from Oil Profits', 2016)

Sport featured explicitly in Vision 2030 documentation. Arab News coverage stated:

One of the goals of Vision 2030 is “creating a vibrant society with fulfilling lives” through among other things “the promotion of physical and social well-being and a healthy lifestyle.” Vision 2030 acknowledges that opportunities for playing sports in Saudi Arabia have previously been limited and recognizes the importance of sports as part of a healthy lifestyle (Al-Ghalayini, 2018)

Economic metrics were deployed to frame sporting investment. Coverage of Turki Alalshikh's statements noted:

Most of the economic benefits will flow to Saudi companies through tourism, infrastructure development, and job creation aligned with Vision 2030 targets. (Turki Alalshikh, 2024)

4.4.2 Developmental Legitimacy

Employing economic indicators and the Vision 2030 framework, the evaluative criteria are shifted from ethical considerations towards developmental objectives. In a 2023 interview with Fox News, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia and the mastermind behind the Vision 2030 strategy said:

The economic impact of these events is measurable. We're creating jobs, building infrastructure, and attracting tourism. These are Vision 2030 objectives. (Turki Alalshikh, 2024)

Albara'a Alwazir, director of economic research at the US-Saudi Business Council spoke about the surge in sporting investment in Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabia also launched a SR15 billion Tourism Development Fund in June 2020 to develop the sector in collaboration with private and investment banks.

(Arab News, 2021)

Regional media reinforced developmental framing. Arab News coverage stated:

Large developments such as Qiddiya and the Riyadh Sports Boulevard are expected to produce tens of thousands of jobs during construction, and also provide permanent job opportunities in sports and tourism for Saudi nationals.

(Arab News, 2021)

4.4.3 Domestic Pride

Domestic sport event hosting developed a long-lasting form of collective pride that operated regardless of international criticism, thus creating a self-sustaining form of political investment within Saudi Arabia. The following is a YouTube comment left on the Turki Alalshikh interview video:

As a Saudi and a boxer myself, I have to say that I am very proud of Turki's outstanding job to the boxing industry. (@abdullahta-wm1wq, 2024)

Diaspora audiences expressed the same notion of national affirmation, with Saudi Arabia's hosting of sports viewed by diaspora audiences as an expression of Arab identity in the global arena. In one of the comments on the Sami Zayn promotional video on YouTube, it was written:

In case someone's wondering what he said, He said: peace and blessing and the mercy of allah be upon you all (greeting terms muslims use like we say hi or hello),

then he said: this is the first time in history monday night raw is being held in an arab country, then he says: riyadh! let them hear all your voices, let's go! (meaning to cheer loudly and be proud together), I'm not even arab, but i studied the arabic language. (@hanzalaenam9661, 2024)

Crucially, these stories of domestic pride emerged independently and in direct opposition to Western critical narratives, suggesting that developmental legitimacy was most effective in its intended domestic context. A comment left on a YouTube video analysing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's sportswashing statement read:

Hes basically saying that his objective is to grow GDP and not sports wash. So if people want to call it that then they can. Great answer to show that he doesnt care about how people will always perceive anything the Saudis do as negative. Hes taking the power away from critics that have a negative agenda and basically insinuates keep crying bro, I have GDP targets to reach 😂. (@riyad.098, 2023)

4.4.4 Western Ineffectiveness

Despite the development and implementation of economic indicators and arguments based on developmental legitimacy, the audiences in the Western media demonstrated resistance to reframing, continuing to emphasise the human rights critique as the dominant evaluative framework. The Guardian's coverage of the Saudi Arabian sportswashing accusation stated:

Previously, sports figures and brands had rejected offers to engage with Saudi Arabia due to its well-documented human rights abuses. (Michaelson, 2023)

Human rights framing dominated Western coverage despite developmental arguments.

The Guardian coverage stated:

After the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia was broadly shunned, with many major corporations withdrawing or pausing investments in the country. (Michaelson, 2023)

Western audiences maintained critical framing despite developmental arguments, yet their engagement with Saudi sporting events revealed the ineffectiveness of this critique.

A YouTube comment on a WWE WrestleMania Saudi Arabia announcement video stated:

To all the frustrated fans, if you really want to show your frustration, STOP WATCHING WWE. Y'all love to complain but still tune in like mindless sheep. So long as y'all keep watching, they'll keep doing whatever they want. (@alaverga07, 2025).

4.5 Operationalisation and contestation of sportswashing and soft power

The data suggests that sportswashing and soft power are not simply analytical concepts, but active discursive tools that are being strategically employed by various actors with different, often conflicting, political agendas. Each term generates a corresponding resistance that seeks to challenge their validity in terms of being an evaluative tool.

4.5.1 Soft Power Legitimation

Western media portrays deployment of soft power framing systematically to position sport event investments as responsible statecraft and legitimate development policy, reframing sporting acquisition as cultural diplomacy rather than reputation management.

The Guardian talks about how the regime used sport as a tool for soft power to improve lives in Saudi Arabia:

It is about sportswashing, using sport as a tool of soft power, and improving the lives of its population, 70% of which is under 35, and diversifying its economy, all at the same time.(Ingle, 2023)

Developmental framing accompanied soft power discourse. Arab News coverage of Vision 2030 sporting strategy stated:

Saudi Arabia has deployed billions from its Public Investment Fund over the last two-and-a-half years according to analysis by the Guardian, spending on sports at a scale that has completely changed professional golf and transformed the international transfer market for football. (Michaelson, 2023)

4.5.2 Sportswashing Critique

The Western actors have used the term sportswashing as a delegitimisation tool, labelling the Saudi sport investment as a move in reputation management that is aimed at distracting from human rights violations. This notion was expressed by Human Rights Watch, as stated by The Guardian:

However, there has been a worrisome shift in moral stance, as lucrative deals are now being accepted despite the ongoing and deteriorating violations. (Michaelson, 2023)

The term sportswashing was used in a systematic way in relation to different contexts of sporting events, and it was used in a pre-emptive way to delegitimise Saudi involvement in any sport. CBS News reports stated:

Recently, the sportswashing accusation has been levied against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Under his leadership, the non-profit organization, Reprieve, found the rate of executions have nearly doubled. (Zubrow, 2023)

The label escalated beyond media commentary into formal political discourse where key U.S. lawmakers had criticized the LIV Golf merger with the PGA Tour as an attempt by the kingdom to distract from its human rights record:

A regime that has killed journalists, jailed and tortured dissidents, fostered the war in Yemen, and supported other terrorist activities, including 9/11. It's called sportswashing. (Richardson, 2023)

4.5.3 Whataboutism and Counter-Narratives

The counter-narrative escalated when focused on Western foreign policy, with the commentators placing Saudi investment in sports within a broader framework of global political hypocrisy. A YouTube comment on a video discussing the murder of Jamal Khashoggi said:

Just the way America, Israel and KSA have gotten away with murders of millions in YEMEN, IRAQ, AFGHAN and SYRIA; and continue to get away with more murders. (@zaem2893, 2019)

This comparative critique also included Western governmental complicity, with commentators highlighting the contrast between condemnation and assistance. A YouTube comment on a video discussing the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi reads:

Trump doesn't care if Bin Salman is a murderer SA The Saudis pay Trump too much 💰 money 💰 for their weapons deals and hotel fees. (@PSYCHOBEVO, 2019)

4.5.4 Dual Weaponisation

Moreover, the data suggests that soft power and sportswashing function simultaneously as rival interpretive tools, each of which has encountered enough resistance to prevent analytical dominance by either one of them. The Guardian's coverage stated:

Saudi Arabia's relatively sudden interest in sports can be construed as a soft power tactic to help distract from the kingdom's ongoing human rights abuses and the Yemen crisis (Zidan, 2019)

From the perspective of the audience, this conceptual contestation resulted in a pragmatic relativism that refused to privilege one interpretive approach over another. A comment on a YouTube video discussing MBS's sportswashing statement read:

He is saying call it what you want . The purpose of it is to develop economy ! Contrary to some medias claiming the purpose is sports washing . It is not ! (@sanaoj8686, 2023)

5. Discussion

5.1. Chapter Preview

This chapter analyses the four themes from the findings; using the dual-tier framework of soft power (Nye, 2004; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018) and critical discourse theory (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Each theme is discussed regarding how Saudi Arabia's sport event strategy operates as a soft tool for projecting a national image, how dominating and contested narratives function in different media environments, how Vision 2030 alignment impacts the effectiveness of their strategy, and how sportswashing and soft power function as rhetorical weapons in the battleground of global politics. This chapter also links the empirical analysis of the study to literature on the topic.

5.2. Theme 1: Strategic Deployment of Sport Events for National Image Projection

This theme addresses Research Question 1 by demonstrating how Saudi Arabia leverages sport events with four interrelated mechanisms: domestic nation building, international prestige building, cultural authenticity, and multi-sport portfolio building. As a soft power framework, these mechanisms align with Nye's (2004) notions of cultural appeal and demonstration capability. However, a critical discourse theory lens identifies the mechanisms as communicative actions that produce preferred notions of the Saudi state and its modernity (Fairclough, 1992).

The nation building mechanism illustrates that sport events are first internalised before being externalised as soft power and demonstrates that the mechanisms operate as both a domestic political tool as well as a tool for building a soft power strategy. The pride narratives evident in both official communications and diaspora interactions are in consonance with Brannagan and Giulianotti's (2018) view of soft power strategies operating as internal legitimisation tools, rather than purely external agents. Turki Alalshikh's comment on being proud to have provided the setting for the realisation of

major events as part of the Vision 2030 initiative is an instance of what Grix and Houlihan (2014) term the domestic mobilisation effect of sport mega-events. The emotional investment of Saudi and Arab audiences in such events generates identity investments that are politically irrevocable despite any negative comment from the international community. Such identity investments are therefore politically inescapable, as Hemmonsby and Tichaawa (2018) also found, as internal nation branding effects can persist independently of any impact on the international reputation of the nation.

The spectacle and prestige mechanism for Saudi shows how the Kingdom leverages celebrity appeal and event scale to communicate its organisational capabilities and establish a sense of equivalence with established sporting nations. The hiring of Cristiano Ronaldo, who Fortune magazine describes as a "household name" with "more than 500 million social media followers," conforms to what Grix (2012) terms the symbolic leverage of sport event promotion. However, a more nuanced reading emerges using a critical discourse theory lens that shows how the statement that "Saudi Arabia is boosting its presence in the biggest sports" operates discursively to normalise the Kingdom's emergence as a player in global sport event governance structures that previously excluded it. This reading aligns with Fairclough's (2003) view of discourse as a material force that shapes social realities; by repeatedly positioning Saudi Arabia alongside Las Vegas and London in production quality comparison statements, media discourse has no choice but to comply with its redefinition of what passes for acceptable structures and practices within the global sporting event industry.

The cultural authenticity mechanism is the most theoretically insightful finding of this theme. The Arabic promotion of Sami Zayn and Turki Alalshikh's deliberate projection of himself as an ardent fan of boxing operate within the affective register of soft power identified by Nye (2004), generating interest in the Saudi state as a credible promoter of sport events rather than relying on material incentives for attraction. The audience

comment pointing out that Turki seems to genuinely enjoy boxing compared to celebrity involvement pure and simple, transactional logic indicates how the public engages with narratives around celebrities and sport events, and how they negotiate narratives around cultural authenticity that are not presented as immutable. This finding supports and extends, Grix and Brannagan's(2016) findings on the importance of credibility in successful soft power strategies, however, it also shows that cultural authenticity can be understood as a discursive construct (Fairclough, 1992).

The multi-sport event strategy that underpins the Kingdom's international strategy is the study's most innovative empirical contribution. The comments from The New York Times, which state that "the breadth of investment is unprecedented," and the audience comment that "This man is going to make every fight that Boxing and fight fans always dream of a reality, He is the Saviour of Boxing" (@TripleA679, 2024) shows how the multi-sport event strategy has reached a saturation point where sport events have become so routine and accepted as part of Saudi Arabia's global sporting presence. In contrast to Germany's single 2006 World Cup event or South Africa's 2010 tournament, which Grix (2012) and Knott et al. (2016) analyse as distinct and separate instances of soft power building, the Saudi Kingdom's presence across boxing, wrestling, golf, football, and motorsport events simultaneously creates a persistent visibility for the state as an institutional player in global sporting events. This saturation effect is based on accumulated exposure rather than a significant impact on the sport world on the other side of the fence from the Kingdom. Thus, it is analysed as a separate construct from the mega-event paradigm that guides most scholarship on sport diplomacy (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). The BBC comment noting how Saudi Arabia has gone "from minimal involvement to hosting some of the world's biggest events in less than a decade" encapsulates the temporal dimensions of this strategy and its expected

normalisation effects on the States' institutional presence in global sporting events at unprecedented rates and scales.

5.3. Theme 2: Divergent Media Narratives and Digital Discourse Dynamics

This theme addresses Research Question 2, demonstrating the existence of three numerically distinct levels of narrative discourse operating in accordance with different logics of evaluation. Critical discourse theory provides the primary framework of analysis because the findings demonstrate that discourse is not a neutral description of a sporting event but a contested site in which the relations of power are exercised (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

The Western sportswashing framework exemplifies what Entman (1993) has called the power of framing. By accepting the sportswashing frame of reference as a self-evident position, Western media render Saudi sport investments illegitimate, whatever their developmental or sporting merits. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's statement that 'if sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by way of 1%, I will continue doing sportswashing' (Richardson, 2023) is revealing not for what it says but for how it was presented. Despite stating his intention in transparently utilitarian terms, CNBC's coverage of the prince's statement corroborates Daoudi et al.'s (2025) finding that Western media politicise Gulf sport event hosting and extends Almahraj's (2023) study of British press coverage of Saudi sporting events by showing that the sportswashing frame operates as Fairclough (2003) has called an order of discourse. This is a relatively stable (though contested) structure of discursive practices that limits what can be said about Saudi sport in Western institutional media.

The uniformity with which the sportswashing label has been applied to LIV Golf, WWE boxing and football shows how Skey (2023) has argued that the concept of sportswashing has become analytically imprecise; it is now primarily a political frame. The audience recognition of Saudi funding patterns as conforming to established sportswashing

definitions suggests the frame has also become a readily available interpretive template for critics of such investments (Sanderson et al., 2016). Yet, as critical discourse theory indicates, this does not operate as a unidirectional flow of information; the very ubiquity of this frame has created a space in which alternate interpretations can be contested. Therefore supporting Wodak and Meyer's (2009) claim that (relatively) dominant discourses always generate spaces in which such contestation can occur.

The regional development frame operates as a discursive counter-frame to contest the evaluative logic of human rights violations in terms of positive developments in regional economic development, cultural affirmation, or other measures. Arab News's coverage framing the investment in sport in terms of Vision 2030's goal for economic diversification provides an instance of what Ahmad and Al-Zoubi (2025) have called non-Western media's focus on developmental narratives that do not prioritise political concerns that do not serve their regional interests. Thus, Turki Alalshikh's pride in organisational achievement is presented in Arab News coverage not just as a matter of successful sporting event organisation as seen in Western coverage but as the sign of a thriving national institution in and of itself. The fact that the progress of women's sport is presented in terms of its incorporation in an economic development discourse rather than human rights reform frame suggests how regional media frame social developments as a goal of endogenous modernisation efforts rather than external interventions (thus resonating with Daoudi et al.'s (2025) findings on Al Jazeera media framing of the Qatar 2022 event).

Digital public contestation operates as what Manor (2019) has called the participatory turn in digital diplomacy where a diverse public contributes to shaping narratives rather than passively receiving institutional narratives. The pragmatic sporting comment, 'Saudi Arabia is boosting its presence in the biggest sports events. Respect and support for Turki Alalshikh and Saudi Arabia for what they are doing' (@MUSICUNEEED, 2024), indicates

an evaluation based on sporting content rather than geopolitical concerns thus corroborating Abeza's (2023) finding that social media sport narratives operate according to different logics than traditional institutional media narratives. The whataboutism comment asking 'Violence is all countries. What about Russia? Is US safe country?' (@lifewithat1974, 2024) demonstrates what can be called a form of discursive counter-power that uses comparative analysis to undermine the authority of Western critiques of Saudi sport funding. While whataboutism might be viewed as a fallacious appeal for precedent, it can be viewed as a valid query regarding who has the authority to define sound governance structures for sport (Fairclough, 2003). The comment expressing Muslim pride in regional sporting events ('As a Muslim who is been a fan of @WWE for so long, happy to hear our Islamic greeting opened in Monday Night Raw' (@Ibrahim-Aar, 2024)) indicates how digital spaces allow for non-Western audiences to propose alternative evaluation frames without traditional media gatekeeping structures (thus affirming Zhang and Tang's (2024) findings on digital diplomacy and nationalist impulses).

The alternative modernities dimension reveals the most theoretically interesting aspect of Theme 2. The emotional resonance created by linguistic and cultural representation, such as the comment from a Canadian viewer expressing happiness that WWE celebrated Zayn's heritage and cultural diversity (@mjking8704, 2024), operates on an affective level that resists analysis in terms of political awareness. This supports Shahid et al.'s (2025) argument about the social construction of nationalism through cultural symbols, and demonstrates through discourse creating subject positions (Fairclough, 1992) – or ways of being – within the world. For Arab audiences, moments of cultural fit within global sport events provide a non-governance evaluated affirmation of identity, suggesting the limitations of conceptualisations of soft power that see it as mere instrumentalism for enhancing reputation (Nye, 2004; Grix & Brannagan 2024).

5.4. Theme 3: Vision 2030 Integration and Differentiated Effectiveness

This theme addresses Research Question 3 with the insight that sport investment's structural embedding within Vision 2030 generates varying levels of effectiveness in domestic, commercial and Western audience contexts. This finding requires theoretical resolution in terms of both soft power and critical discourse theories.

The structural economic embedding dimension makes clear that Saudi sport investment is practiced in the style of what El-Dabt et al. (2025) term sustainable strategic nation branding: the embedding of sporting activity within a formally constituted development programme with established GDP and tourism targets. The BBC 2016 ('Saudi Arabia Agrees Plans to Move Away from Oil Profits', 2016) report on Vision 2030's objective of "ensuring we can live without oil by 2020" and the more detailed explanation of its definition as a 'key non-oil economic sector' in Arab News coverage corroborate Pratiwi and Muslihat's (2024) view of Vision 2030 as a total transformation programme rather than cosmetic reform. The presence of this structural embedding confers what may be termed procedural legitimacy on Saudi sport events; they are justified not by reputation management but by contribution to a clearly specified development target (Ettinger, 2023). Conversely, from a critical discourse perspective, this represents a complex reframing strategy; by locating its sport investment programme within the discourse of economic diversification, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is able to shift the focus of what are normally pertinent ethical criteria for sporting investments (Fairclough, 2003).

The developmental legitimacy dimension demonstrates the use of economic arguments and their measurement in a discursive contest with the sportswashing frame. Mohammed bin Salman's comment that 'if sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by way of 1%, I will continue doing sportswashing', and Turki Alalshikh's claim in his Sky News Arabia interview that they will see 'measurable economic impact' through 'jobs, infrastructure, and tourism' are in consonance with what Grix and Brannagan (2024) describe as the hard

edge of soft power, using clear measures of impact to justify policy decisions. Yet critical discourse theory reveals that these claims do more than report facts and figures; they reframe a complex political debate within a technicalised model of calculation. This appears to be an advanced level of complexity because it accepts the sportswashing frame of reference while emptying it of its moral connotations by treating it as a technicalised economic model for an investment rather than an ethical concern (Skey, 2023). The Arab News emphasis on the 'large developments such as Qiddiya and the Riyadh Sports Boulevard' (Arab News, 2021) that will create infrastructural and physical legacies to sports events in Saudi Arabia that endure independently of any reputational impact on their country reinforces this framing .

The domestic pride dimension demonstrates the existence of what can be termed the self-reinforcing quality of hosting sporting events in contexts where pride in national accomplishment is considered the primary form of legitimation. The YouTube comments from Saudi nationals and diaspora fans that expressed pride in their national accomplishment show that sporting events generate identity investments that make continued hosting of sporting events politically necessary regardless of how well (or poorly) they are received in other international contexts (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). The comment from one viewer that "He's basically saying that his objective is to grow GDP and not sports wash. So, if people want to call it that then they can. Great answer to show that he doesn't care about how people will always perceive anything the Saudis do as negative. He's taking the power away from critics that have a negative agenda" (@riyad.098, 2023) suggests a strong emotional bond to sporting events in Saudi Arabia that operates independently of any soft power successes or failures vis-à-vis audiences in the West. This corroborates Grix's (2012) finding of nation branding effects in domestic contexts even in situations where impacts on international reputation are limited. From a soft power perspective, however, this situation seems to create an intriguing paradox: the

strategy succeeds domestically but fails internationally, suggesting that soft power frameworks built on the assumption of attractiveness to foreign audiences may be insufficient for dealing with the multidirectional implications of sporting diplomacy in contemporary settings (Nye, 2004; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

The ineffectiveness in the Western audience context dimension proves that Vision 2030 investment programmes are insufficient to change Western audiences' perceptions of the appropriateness of Saudi sport investments. Human rights concerns retain their relevance when assessing sporting investments, overriding arguments concerning developmental achievements in Western institutionalised media outlets. This finding confirms and extends Gerschewski et al.'s (2024) experimental findings on the inefficacy of organisational capacity frames when competing frames are more compelling, and that negative attitudes towards states that have leveraged sporting events can only be overcome by stronger organisational capacity. The audience dismissal of Vision 2030 as insufficient to overcome sportswashing critiques shows that arguments based on developmental impact have limited success in convincing audiences who view state actors and their activities through the lens of human rights considerations. This finding runs counter to Knott et al.'s (2016) optimistic views regarding leveraging potential for impactful change and instead supports Boykoff's (2022) insights into the structural relevance of sportswashing critiques for how Western audiences interpret Gulf State sport investments. From a critical discourse perspective, however, this indicates competing 'regimes of truth' (Fairclough, 2003) in competing discourses on what is an acceptable frame of reference for evaluating the legitimacy of sporting investments. Western audiences see the relevance of human rights as an acceptable measure of legitimacy for sporting investments, yet regional actors contest this position by insisting that economic development is an equally relevant (if not more relevant) frame of reference for determining legitimacy. Neither perspective appears to dominate in this contested terrain

because both rely on fundamentally different ideological assumptions regarding what is legitimate in processes involving nation-states (Wolfe et al., 2025).

5.5 Theme 4: Operationalisation and Contestation of Sportswashing and Soft Power

This theme addresses the answer to the fourth research question by demonstrating that sportswashing and soft power are not neutral categories but active discursive weapons that a variety of actors employ. Critical discourse theory stands as the primary tool of analysis for demonstrating that categories themselves become contested spaces (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

The soft power legitimisation frame displays the strategic deployment of soft power by Saudi officials to frame its sport investment as a responsible use of the power of the state. 'We're building soft power through sport. This is about cultural exchange, economic development, and showing the world our capabilities' states Turki Alalshikh in his Guardian interview, an example of the appropriation of academic concepts for political legitimisation, as defined by Grix and Brannagan (2024). Coverage in Arab News calls it 'a sophisticated exercise in soft power', while Arab News coverage of Vision 2030 sporting strategy frames Saudi sport investments as efforts 'to boost Saudi youth participation in sports, utilise the private sector to address infrastructure and knowledge gaps, and pursue a national reputation for leadership in sports'. This use is in consonance with the argument of Grix and Brannagan (2016) that states now rely on linguistic framing that references soft power to justify their sporting investments. However, such appropriation transforms the frame into an empty signifier, as defined by Fairclough (2003); it is a concept vague enough to be applied to any interpretation, but one that carries enough legitimacy from association with Nye's (2004) work that it is impossible to ignore. The use of rhetoric that references soft power does not signify adherence to Nye's conceptualisation; however, it forms part of a discourse that legitimises the investment in sporting events rather than its transactional nature (Jarvie, 2024).

The sportswashing critique frame displays the reverse weaponisation of sportswashing as a delegitimising frame. Human Rights Watch characterises Saudi Arabia's investment in football as 'a clear attempt by the Saudi authorities to sportswash their appalling human rights record', while CBS News coverage of Congressional hearing testimony calls it "'sportswashing' used to 'deflect attention from its human rights issues'". This frame is a 'sticky label' that, as defined by Boykoff (2022), forms a label that critics find impossible to shake despite any changes in policy or developmental outcomes. The systematic deployment of this frame across CBS News coverage and Congressional hearings demonstrates how it has become institutionalised as a framework of reference within the Western human rights community. Yet Skey's (2023) assertion that the term lacks analytical use is corroborated by empirical evidence; it is applied uniformly to boxing, golf, football, and WWE events without any consideration for which events may serve which reputational goals or how any investment in sport may or may not be 'sportswashing'. This lack of precision suggests that sportswashing functions as a political tool rather than a conceptual analytical framework. This supports the argument of Wolfe et al. (2025) that sportswashing discourse itself forms a type of soft power that western critics use to delegitimise non-Western sport event hosting.

The whataboutism frame displays the most troublesome challenge to the authority of sportswashing critiques posed to Saudi Arabia. YouTube comments that call for caution in applying the sportswashing frame to Saudi Arabia while ignoring its application to the same states that ally with Western states pose a challenge to its selective application by raising questions of comparable practices to the same unacceptable outcomes. Comments highlighting perceived Western hypocrisy regarding Saudi Arabia's human rights record while Western nations engage in military actions (@zaeem2893, 2019) do not defend the governance of Saudi Arabia; they ask who has the position from which to pass judgement on others. This resonates with the finding of Daoudi et al. (2025) that non-Western

audiences increasingly question who has the moral authority to impose normative governance on other states. From a soft power angle, however, this represents a decline in the legitimacy of attraction as defined by Nye (2004). As the inconsistencies of states that use soft power over social media platforms deepen, their ability to exert an influence over other states through the appeal of their example rather than coercion declines (Manor, 2019; Zhang & Tang, 2024).

The dual weaponisation dimension represents the study's most significant theoretical contribution. Audience commentary that recognises the relativism inherent in these concepts ('call it what you want. The purpose of it is to develop economy!' (@sanaoj8686, 2023)) establishes that both terms have become mainly discursive resources in the geopolitics of global sport governance contests for rhetorical contention (Grix & Brannagan, 2024). The dismissive attitude towards critics shown in audience comments illustrates this observation and aligns with Wolfe et al.'s (2025) claim for the hard edge of soft power by substantiating that soft power itself has become a contested concept whose meaning is contention rather than analytical stability. In line with Fairclough (2003), this is reflexivity. The terms of discourse have become an object of political contestation. Rather than being neutral analytical constructs, sportswashing and soft power are both normatively and politically imbued with commitments that reflect specific, contested geopolitical interests. The implications for sport diplomacy scholarship are profound. The conceptual frameworks scholars use to make sense of states' actions have themselves become tools states use to exert influence on their competitors, forcing scholars to seek new conceptual frameworks that make good account for being complicit in creating the very phenomenon they seek to study (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Boykoff, 2022; Skey, 2023; Wolfe et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion

6.1 Research Objective

The overall purpose of this research project has been to explore how Saudi Arabia uses global sport events to reposition itself in the international community and showcase a revamped national image consistent with its Vision 2030 initiative. It also seeks to analyse, within a frame of soft power and sportswashing, how sport events are promoted across Western, regional, and digital media contexts. The research has explored news articles, YouTube videos and their comment sections from media outlets that cover the hosting of Saudi Arabian sport events. Netnography and document analysis were employed within the research's application of thematic analysis to generate themes answering the research's questions. The application of this technique across two distinct datasets: written news articles; YouTube videos and YouTube comment sections; has resulted in a deeper understanding of the divergences and convergences between institutional media narratives and public narratives shared within digital environments.

The research questions pertaining to the study were:

RQ1: How is Saudi Arabia using global sport events to influence international perceptions and project a modernised national image?

RQ2: What narratives are presented in global and regional media, social media platforms, and digital content regarding Saudi Arabia's sport event-hosting activities?

RQ3: To what extent is Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy aligned with its Vision 2030 agenda, and how effective has it been in achieving the desired shift in global perception?

RQ4: How are concepts of sportswashing and soft power operationalised within the Saudi Arabian context, and what are the implications for global sport politics and human rights discourse?

To answer the first research question of how Saudi Arabia shapes a postmodern image of itself through global sport events. The research determined four modes of operation: a domestic nation-building and identity-formation role, a model of acquiring global prestige through spectacle and celebrities, a commitment to cultural authenticity, and a multi-sport event strategy that maintains a continuous flow of international exposure. The parallel development of initiatives in four different sport sectors (boxing, wrestling, golf and football) and one (motorsport) mega-event promoter; what the research terms 'saturation diplomacy'; distinguishes the Saudi strategy from a concentrated mega-event strategy exemplified by previous cases, such as Germany 2006 or South Africa 2010.

To answer the second research question of how different types of media report on Saudi activities in relation to hosting sport events, the research examined Western institutional media (news articles), regional media (news outlets) and YouTube comment sections. The research found that Western institutional media reports on Saudi investment in sport events almost exclusively through the sportswashing frame, treating concerns about human rights as the primary analytical lens. Regional media report on the same events through a Vision 2030 developmental frame, emphasising economic and social modernisation. The digital public sphere (YouTube comment sections) is an arena in which competing (and even conflicting) frames are simultaneously invoked, challenged and even employed in pragmatic (and sometimes irreverent) ways. Such responses (expressions of Western inconsistency, statements of Arab regional pride and sports-related observations) featured prominently in the research, suggesting that no frame enjoys complete hegemony across different media landscapes.

To answer the third research question of how well Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy conforms to Vision 2030 and its effectiveness in changing the way people view the country, the research investigated the extent to which international events are integrated into formally declared development policy (such as GDP, tourism or employment targets). The results suggest that this conformity to Vision 2030 confers different benefits to viewers depending on their location. Internationally, viewers report that events enhance national pride and identity formation, which provides a self-reinforcing benefit that is impervious to international criticism. Commercially, events establish a track record in establishing a high-quality event portfolio. However, Western viewers find little persuasive power in developmental arguments for their acceptance of Saudi initiatives, suggesting that its effectiveness as a strategy is not universal.

To answer the fourth research question of how sportswashing and soft power are conceptualised in Saudi Arabia, the research found that both terms function as active conceptual tools rather than passive analytical concepts. While Saudi officials invoke terms such as soft power to describe their investments as laudable exercises in public diplomacy and cultural exchange, Western critics and NGOs brand them as attempts to conceal unethical behaviour through a veneer of sporting activity, thus delegitimising them. Citizens of countries with a strong interest in developments in Saudi (visible in the whataboutism exhibited in public comments on YouTube) challenge the authority of these critiques, invoking the sporting achievements of other countries with seemingly persuasive effects. The research also established that both terms have become politicised in such a way that they lose their analytical utility. This has implications for the ways scholars and practitioners in the field of sport event governance can employ these frameworks in their work in the future.

6.2 Contribution of the Study

This research study has explored Saudi Arabia's events strategy for multi-sport events as a means of nation branding and soft power, and therefore addresses a gap in the literature which has, to date, studied the issue of sport event diplomacy and nation branding in relation to states such as Qatar, China and Russia (Ghabban et al., 2025; Satish et al., 2024). In this respect, then, it responds to the research call of Almahraj (2023) and Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) for grounded empirical research on Saudi sport event investments across multiple sports disciplines and events systems. It thus contributes to the work of other scholars who are attempting to address the gaps that exist in the literature on sport event diplomacy and nation branding in contested political contexts.

The study's contributions are also theoretical. In its application of a dual analytical framework of Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004) and Critical Discourse Theory (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), this research study extends beyond previous research studies of sport event diplomacy. While previous research studies have applied each theory in isolation of the other, they have rarely been paired in the existing literature. The use of a framework of reference that examines the state's intentions and attraction-based strategies, underpins this study's analysis of state-led initiatives for sport event investment. Its application of a critique of the narratives presented in media texts and their constructions of legitimacy offers the study a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which soft power is produced, contested and weaponised in relation to different media contexts. The pairing of the two theories is particularly relevant when it comes to researching contested political cases in which competing state narratives compete with critical narratives.

The study's contributions can also be seen in its methodological approach. By combining netnography with document analysis techniques, this research study is able to systematically compare and contrast institutional media narratives with expressions that

appear in public digital discourse about events systems in YouTube comment sections. In doing so, it demonstrates that YouTube comment sections can be viewed as a resource that contains analytically substantive content regarding geopolitical issues. The findings contribute to existing debates about sportswashing and soft power by providing an empirical foundation for the concepts and by identifying dual weaponisation as a relevant framework for understanding how terms that emerge from academic discourse become ‘wired’ into the political realities that scholars seek to study.

6.3 Limitations of the Research

There are some limitations to the study. The dataset was restricted to English-language media and sources, which was a deliberate choice made in the interest of comparing and contrasting Western and regional sources. However, this means that the study does not account for the role of Arabic-language media or Arabic-language social media, which is a significant and important source of domestic discourse in Saudi Arabia. Yet the narratives and commentaries expressed in Arabic, whether through domestic government channels or Arabic-language social media platforms, remain unexplored, limiting the study’s claims regarding how the strategy is (or at least was) perceived within the Kingdom itself.

Another limitation is that the study is based on publicly accessible secondary data sources, rather than primary data collected from the strategic intentions of the relevant actors. Thus, while the study can identify and interpret patterns within the discourse about Saudi Arabia’s sporting investments, it cannot make claims regarding direct causal links between those investments and measurable shifts in international attitudes toward the necessary research design; this would require a longitudinal or experimental design to make such claims regarding soft power outcomes.

A related limitation is that Saudi Arabia’s sport events strategy is rapidly evolving. Important developments have emerged in the writing of this dissertation, from the

confirmation of Saudi Arabia's role in hosting the 2034 FIFA World Cup to the ongoing (and apparently still unresolved) negotiations between LIV Golf and the PGA Tour. Yet the findings presented here represent a snapshot of a rapidly changing strategy, and some of the conclusions drawn may need to be revisited in light of future developments or revelations regarding the relationship between sporting investment and domestic governance.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Saudi Arabia's sport events strategy is an area that would benefit from subsequent research in the context of Vision 2030's evolving 2030 targets. Given this study's limitations, it would be possible to carry out subsequent research that does consider Arabic-language media and domestic social media platforms like Snapchat and TikTok, whose user base is primarily Saudi, rather than being an international platform like YouTube. This would clarify the frames that domestic audiences have compared to the international audience, as well as the differences in public reception within both these different information environments.

Another area of subsequent research could focus on longitudinal studies that track shifts in international attitudes over the course of Vision 2030's implementation, as well as studies that use a media content analysis and audience survey design, and experimentally frames study designs that replicate those found in Gerschewski et al. (2024) in several countries, all in the name of ascertaining whether the normalisation effects identified in this research demonstrate enduring changes in attitudes. Another direction for subsequent research would be to investigate the impact of Saudi Arabia's investment in international sport events on improvements to the governance of the Kingdom. Studies that correlate improvements to human rights indicators with the timeline of the relevant sport events would be of interest in ongoing debates over the normalisation effects of sport event

exposure in the region, and whether such exposure can catalyse domestic political reforms or whether it simply serves to normalise the Kingdom's international engagement.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Data Sources Overview

Sl. No.	Source,Year	Source Title	Key Themes	Region	Full URL
1	The New York Times, 2018	Jamal Khashoggi Killing: Visual Investigation	Khashoggi murder, Human rights violations, Investigative journalism	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=uJ44spUo8Uk
2	CBS News, 2023	PGA-LIV Golf Merger Coverage	Sportwashing, 9/11 families, Golf merger controversy	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=7Q_cGiduoOA
3	Sky News, 2023	Cristiano Ronaldo Al-Nassr Signing	History in the making, Global prestige, Celebrity recruitment	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=k1fhNhX2kWE
4	Sky News Arabia, 2023	Turki Alalshikh Sportwashing Interview	GDP growth, Vision 2030, Sportwashing defense	Regional	https://youtube.com/watch?v=KrmqY9hyCCw

Sl. No.	Source,Year	Source Title	Key Themes	Region	Full URL
5	WWE, 2024	WrestleMania 43 Announcement	Historic first, Global brand, Riyadh Season	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZjtX-ykaRV4
6	DAZN Boxing, 2024	Moses Itauma Boxing Highlight - Riyadh	Boxing spectacle, World-class venue, Athletic excellence	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=00YF5SKuLfl
7	WWE, 2024	Randy Orton vs Cody Rhodes - Night of Champions	WWE event, Riyadh venue, Entertainment spectacle	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=1xvxUx3Rg_M
8	DAZN Boxing, 2024	Zhilei Zhang vs Agit Kabayel Boxing Match	Boxing excellence, Riyadh sports hub, World-class fight	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=Bt4jqYiPKfl
9	DAZN Boxing, 2024	Carlos Adames vs Hamza Sheeraz Boxing Match	Championship boxing, Riyadh venue, Split draw decision	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=iOgxTs3I83w

Sl. No.	Source,Year	Source Title	Key Themes	Region	Full URL
10	WWE, 2024	Sami Zayn Speaking Arabic - WWE Riyadh	Cultural identity, Language pride, Saudi audience	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=Rwpa1KMgBec
11	Sky Sports, 2023	LIV Golf Discussion with Paul McGinley	LIV Golf, PGA merger, Golf controversy	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=UICswP8utes
12	Sky Sports, 2021	Newcastle United Saudi Takeover Coverage	Newcastle takeover, Football ownership, Saudi investment	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=X9fdKFfOPck
13	NBC News, 2022	Phil Mickelson LIV Golf Controversy	Mickelson apology, Saudi golf investment, Sponsor loss	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=xodDzw5KKX4
14	WWE, 2023	WWE Saudi Arabia Event Coverage	WWE partnership, Saudi entertainment, Riyadh events	Global	https://youtube.com/watch?v=wfo8JPAHIOQ

Sl. No.	Source,Year	Source Title	Key Themes	Region	Full URL
15	Sky News, 2023	FIFA World Cup 2034 Saudi Arabia Announcement	FIFA World Cup, 2034 hosting, Controversial selection	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZpMAApwp_KM
16	Saudi Sports Media, 2023	Cristiano Ronaldo Al-Nassr Fan Event (Arabic)	Ronaldo fan interaction, Arabic interview, Celebrity signing	Regional	https://youtube.com/watch?v=OhlmggeaTrs
17	CNBC, 2023	Building Saudi Arabia's Future Economy Panel	Economic diversification, Vision 2030, Sports investment	Western	https://youtube.com/watch?v=FkTjIEoa5zE
18	Sky News Arabia, 2023	Riyadh Season Interview with Saudi Sports Official	Riyadh Season, Sports strategy, Official perspective	Regional	https://youtube.com/watch?v=TVBFxDQq214

Sl. No.	Source,Year	Source Title	Key Themes	Region	Full URL
19	SSC Sports, 2023	Riyadh Season Cup Pre-season Football Match	Pre-season football, Celebrity teams, Saudi league	Regional	https://youtube.com/watch?v=5PmXo8lmGso
20	SSC Sports, 2023	Riyadh Season Cup Final: Al-Hilal vs Al-Nassr	Cup final, Riyadh Season, Saudi football	Regional	https://youtube.com/watch?v=vW6Edimz2Qg
21	BBC News, 2016	Saudi Arabia agrees plans to move away from oil profits	Vision 2030, Economic diversification, Oil independence	Western	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36131391
22	BBC News, 2016	Can Saudi Arabia's bold reforms cure growing financial woes?	Economic reforms, Financial challenges, Modernization	Western	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37516495

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23	CBC News, 2017	Saudi Arabia to let women enter sports stadiums in 2018	Women's rights, Stadium access, Social reform	Western	https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/saudi-arabia-women-enter-sports-stadiums-1.4378328
24	CNN, 2017	Saudi Arabia to let women into sports stadiums	Women's participation, Social change, Sports access	Western	https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/29/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-sports-arenas
25	CNBC, 2018	WWE still plans to hold Crown Jewel pay-per-view event in Saudi Arabia despite the outcry	WWE controversy, Khashoggi aftermath, Event continuation	Western	https://www.cNBC.com/2018/10/22/wwe-to-hold-saudi-pay-per-view-event-despite-khashoggi-killing.html
26	CBS News, 2018	Saudi women allowed into stadiums for first	Historic moment, Women's access, Football spectators	Western	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-women-allowed-to-enter-stadiums-for-first-time-to-watch-soccer/

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		time to watch soccer			
27	CNBC, 2019	Joshua vs Ruiz title fight in Saudi Arabia will 'change boxing forever,' promoter says	Boxing milestone, Promotional claims, Desert fight	Western	https://www.cnbccom/2019/08/13/joshua-vs-ruiz-title-fight-in-saudi-arabia-will-change-boxing-forever-promoter-says.html
28	Al Jazeera, 2019	Anthony Joshua takes revenge on Ruiz Jr in Saudi Arabia rematch	Boxing rematch, Championship recovery, Riyadh venue	Western	https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2019/12/8/anthony-joshua-takes-revenge-on-ruiz-jr-in-saudi-arabia-rematch
29	The Guardian, 2020	Saudi-led consortium forced to abandon takeover	Newcastle takeover failure, Premier League, Ownership controversy	Western	https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/jul/30/newcastle-united-takeover-falls-through-as-saudi-led-consortium-pulls-out

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		of Newcastle United			
30	NBC Sports, 2020	NBC Sports Presents 2020 Dakar Rally Beginning Today	Dakar Rally, Saudi hosting, Motorsport event	Western	https://www.nbcsports.com/pressbox/press-releases/nbc-sports-presents-2020-dakar-rally-beginning-today-on-nbc
31	Formula1.com, 2021	Hamilton beats Verstappen in controversy-filled first ever Saudi Arabian Grand Prix	Formula 1, Saudi GP, Racing controversy	Western	https://www.formula1.com/en/latest/article/hamilton-beats-verstappen-in-controversy-filled-first-ever-saudi-arabian.5tXuSymwVOwoVCU4LYBHNI
32	CNBC, 2021	Saudi wealth fund buys England's Newcastle United soccer club after	Newcastle acquisition, PIF investment, Football ownership	Western	https://www.cNBC.com/2021/10/07/saudi-wealth-fund-buys-englands-newcastle-united-soccer-team.html

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		months of wrangling			
33	Fortune, 2022	Cristiano Ronaldo signs with Saudi Arabian club in deal that could more than double his salary	Ronaldo signing, Salary package, Transfer news	Western	https://fortune.com/2022/12/31/cristiano-ronaldo-saudi-arabia-al-nassr-new-contract/
34	CNBC, 2022	Saudi-backed LIV Golf envisions franchises in its future, executive says	LIV Golf expansion, Franchise model, Golf future	Western	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/07/29/liv-golf-backed-by-saudis-and-trump-sees-franchises-in-its-future-exec-says.html

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35	CNBC, 2023	PGA Tour agrees to merge with Saudi-backed rival LIV Golf	PGA-LIV merger, Golf unification, Controversial deal	Western	https://www.cNBC.com/2023/06/06/pga-tour-agrees-to-merge-with-saudi-backed-rival-liv-golf.html
36	CNBC, 2023	Saudi crown prince says he will keep 'sportswashing' as criticism grows	Sportswashing defense, MBS statement, Criticism response	Western	https://www.cNBC.com/2023/09/21/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-says-he-will-keep-sportswashing.html
37	Forbes, 2024	Saudi Arabia's Sports Influence Detailed in New Report	Sports influence analysis, Investment report, Strategic assessment	Western	https://www.forbes.com/sites/samindrakunti/2024/12/03/saudi-arabias-sports-influence-detailed-in-new-report/
38	The New York Times, 2024	Saudi Arabia's takeover of world sport: Football,	Multi-sport takeover, Global strategy, Tennis expansion	Western	https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5237849/2024/02/02/saudi-arabia-sport-investments/

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		golf, boxing and now tennis?			
39	BBC News, 2025	Fifa, the Club World Cup and Saudi Arabia	FIFA relations, Club World Cup, Saudi hosting	Western	https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cjrne75xdqjo
40	SportsPro, 2025	Saudi Arabia wants to host NFL international series games	NFL expansion, American football, Turki Alalshikh, Tom Brady flag football event	Western	https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/saudi-arabia-nfl-international-series-turki-alalshikh/
41	Arab News, 2016	WWE Live returns to Riyadh	WWE events, Family entertainment, Sports tourism	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/992256/sports
42	Arab News, 2016	Djokovic begins 2016 season in Qatar	Tennis, Qatar sports, Regional sporting excellence	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/859341/amp

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43	Saudi Gazette, 2017	8 teams vie in Hoteliers League Riyadh 1st basketball event	Basketball, Local sports, Hospitality industry	Regional	https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/520411/Sports/8-teams-vie-in-Hoteliers-League-Riyadh-1st-basketball-event
44	Arab News, 2017	Year in review: Best moments of boxing in 2017	Boxing highlights, Sports review, Regional coverage	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1217036/sports
45	Arab News, 2018	Field of dreams: Turki Al-Sheikh's year of sporting triumphs	Turki Al-Sheikh, Sporting achievements, Leadership profile	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1368521/sport
46	Arab News, 2019	Vision 2030 opens up sports opportunities beyond the pitch	Vision 2030 sports, Opportunity expansion, Development goals	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1326871/amp

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47	Arab News, 2019	Clash On The Dunes to inspire Saudi Arabia to produce world champion boxer	Boxing development, World champion goals, Youth inspiration	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1593841/amp
48	Saudi Gazette, 2019	Saudi Dakar Rally 2020 to kick off on Jan. 5 in Asian continent for first time	Dakar Rally, Historic hosting, Motorsport milestone	Regional	https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/576754/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Dakar-Rally-2020-to-kick-off-on-Jan-5-in-Asian-continent-for-first-time
49	Arab News, 2020	Football federation president welcomes teams to Arab U20 championship	Youth football, Arab championship, Regional tournament	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1628656/sport

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50	Arab News, 2021	Saudi Arabia to host world 3X3 basketball finals	3X3 basketball, World finals, International hosting	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1775916/sport
51	Arab News, 2021	Saudi Arabia leads region with surge in sporting investment	Investment leadership, Regional comparison, Sports spending	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1915751/business-economy
52	Arab News, 2021	Start of regional league ushers in new era for women's football in Saudi Arabia	Women's football, League launch, Gender inclusion	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/1972281/sport
53	Saudi Gazette, 2022	Historic moment for Kingdom as first-ever Saudi Winter Olympics	Winter Olympics, First delegation, Olympic participation	Regional	https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/616674/SAUDI-ARABIA/Historic-moment-for-Kingdom-as-first-ever-Saudi-Winter-Olympics-delegation-arrives-in-Beijing

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		delegation arrives in Beijing			
54	Saudi Gazette, 2022	Saudi Games 2022 begins with colorful opening ceremony	Saudi Games, Opening ceremony, National sports event	Regional	https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/626443/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Games-2022-begins-with-colorful-opening-ceremony
55	Arab News, 2023	Saudi Arabia Sports Development	Sports development, Infrastructure, Progress update	Regional	https://arab.news/wm777
56	Arab News, 2024	F1 will return to Jeddah March 7-9, 2024, as date of 4th Saudi Grand Prix is revealed	Formula 1, Jeddah circuit, Annual F1 event	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/2333166/motorsport
57	Arab News, 2024	The long history of The Beautiful Game in Saudi Arabia	Football history, Saudi heritage, Long-term development	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/2572330/saudi-arabia

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58	Saudi Gazette, 2024	Sports Boulevard project unveils plans for record- breaking sports tower in Riyadh	Infrastructure, Sports Boulevard, Record tower	Regional	https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/658558/saudi-arabia/riyadh-marathon-2026-expands-into-four-day-festival-in-saudi-capital
59	Arab News, 2025	Saudi Arabia's emergence as a global sports capital is a winning strategy	Global capital status, Strategic success, Winning approach	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/2587813
60	Arab News, 2025	Final heartbreak for Saudi Arabia against nine-man Uzbekistan	National team, Match result, Tournament coverage	Regional	https://www.arabnews.com/node/2597794/sport

