
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mega-Sporting Events and Soft Power: Perceived Changes in Qatar's Nation Brand Following the 2022 FIFA World Cup

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| ABSTRACT

Countries increasingly use mega-sporting events as instruments of soft power and nation branding, yet empirical evidence of their impact on international perceptions remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study examines changes in Qatar's nation brand following the 2022 FIFA World Cup by assessing how international audiences evaluated key nation-brand dimensions before and after the event. Drawing on Anholt's Nation Brand Index framework, a quantitative, perception-based design was employed using a cross-sectional survey of an international sample. Respondents retrospectively assessed Qatar across six dimensions: governance, culture, people, tourism, exports, and immigration and investment. The findings indicate a statistically significant but modest improvement in Qatar's overall international image. Perceptual gains were most evident in the dimensions of people, culture, and governance, while economically oriented dimensions showed limited or no change. These results suggest that the World Cup functioned as a reputational enhancer rather than a transformative nation-branding intervention, generating selective and uneven effects. The study contributes to nation-branding and sports-diplomacy research by providing perception-based evidence from a non-Western context and highlighting the importance of aligning mega-events with long-term strategic initiatives to achieve sustainable soft-power outcomes.

| KEYWORDS

Nation Branding, Soft Power, Nation Brand Index, Mega Sporting Events, Qatar

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1.0 Introduction

As the world becomes more connected, often described as a "small village," countries seek ways to raise their international profile through various nation-branding strategies, such as soft power, which refers to a country's ability to influence others by attracting them to its culture, values, and institutions rather than through coercion or force (Nye, 1990). Our research focuses on Qatar, primarily through hosting mega-sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup 2022, as the first Arab nation to host such an event, which has been used as part of Qatar's broader nation-branding and soft power initiatives. This has positioned Qatar at the forefront of global attention, offering unique opportunities to challenge existing stereotypes, increase global familiarity, and shape its reputation (Badran, 2025).

Nation branding is a strategy for building and sharing a positive image of a country with the world, and it has been widely studied (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2015). According to research, successful nation branding encompasses culture, governance, investment, education, international events, and tourism (Fan, 2004; Govers and Go, 2009). In this setting, soft power is now an essential way for countries to show legitimacy and appeal internationally (Nye, 2013).

Mega sporting events are increasingly recognised as practical tools for soft power and nation branding, particularly for small and developing nations aiming to attract rapid international attention (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Grix and Lee, 2013).

These events serve as platforms for symbolic representation, narrative development, and global media exposure. They offer host countries an opportunity to challenge misconceptions, promote modernity, and showcase their best.

While the literature recognises the potential of soft power and nation branding, there remains a critical gap in understanding their actual effectiveness in shifting public perceptions and raising international awareness, particularly for non-Western states such as Qatar. Moreover, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how familiar global audiences were with Qatar before these initiatives and whether the country's international image has changed in a meaningful way following the hosting of the mega sporting event. This study aims to examine perceived changes in global perceptions of Qatar following the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Specifically, it seeks to explore how key dimensions of the nation brand, as conceptualised by Anholt's Nation Brand Index (including governance, culture, people, tourism, exports, and investment), are perceived before and after the event. The study also aims to assess the perceived direction and magnitude of any changes in Qatar's overall international image. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent did perceptions of Qatar change following the FIFA World Cup 2022?
2. Which nation-brand dimensions show the most significant perceived change?
3. How do respondents describe the direction and magnitude of this change?

Using a quantitative research design, this study contributes empirical evidence from a small Gulf state to the nation branding literature. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, brand strategists, and scholars interested in soft power, sports diplomacy, and the strategic management of national image.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Nation Branding Concept and Measurement

Nation branding is a relatively recent area of academic inquiry that builds on concepts and insights developed in earlier research traditions. There is no single, universally accepted definition of nation branding; instead, researchers conceptualise it in different ways, reflecting diverse disciplinary perspectives, objectives, and contexts. These efforts have resulted in multiple definitions that emphasise aspects such as national image, identity, reputation, and strategic communication. Within this broader context, studies on the country-of-origin effect demonstrate that perceptions of a country can influence evaluations of its products and brands in international markets (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993). Another related stream, place and destination branding, primarily developed within tourism and place marketing, examines how cities and countries are promoted to attract visitors, investment, and economic growth (Kotler et al., 1993; Kotler and Gertner, 2004; Morgan et al., 2007). Research on public diplomacy has explored how countries communicate with foreign audiences and manage their international image through soft power and strategic communication (Van Ham, 2001; Melissen, 2015).

The words "nation" and "country" are often used interchangeably in the literature, but they have different meanings (Fan, 2006). Nation branding can be described as the beliefs and impressions people hold about a place, shaped by simple associations and information (Kotler and Gertner, 2004). An additional point is that a nation brand is the sum of people's views of a country across areas such as culture, governance, tourism, investment, and human capital (Anholt, 2005). There is a significant importance of branding and marketing communication in promoting a nation's image, drawing on sources such as country of origin, tourism branding, public diplomacy, and national identity (Fan, 2006). No doubt that nation branding is a complex, multi-level concept in the public domain, involving many stakeholders and encompassing political, economic, social, environmental, historical, and cultural aspects (Fetscherin, 2010). Overall, these definitions show that nation branding is a broad, strategic process focused on shaping, sharing, and managing how people see a country, both within and beyond its borders. In his paper, Ying Fan proposed a holistic definition of nation branding as: "Nation branding is a process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated, and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience" (Fan, 2010).

Anholt is a key contributor to nation branding research, where he developed the Nation Brand Index. His framework uses extensive international surveys to measure how people view countries across areas such as governance, culture, tourism, people, exports, and investment, rather than relying on objective indicators (Anholt, 2005; Anholt, 2007). Although Anholt's Nation Brand Index (NBI) is among the most frequently cited perception-based tools for assessing nation branding, it is not the only approach used to evaluate countries' global standing. Other indices, such as the Good Country Index, also aim to capture international perceptions of nations, but differ in their conceptual focus and measurement logic (Anholt, 2005; Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2015). These alternative frameworks assess countries using diverse criteria, including global contribution, ethical responsibility, and international impact, rather than focusing exclusively on brand perceptions. Recognising the existence of multiple indices highlights the multidimensional nature of nation branding assessment. For this study, the Nation Brand Index is adopted for its strong theoretical foundation, widespread use in nation branding research, and relevance to the study's objectives. According to

the Nation Brand Index, Qatar ranked 53rd in 2022, the year it hosted the FIFA World Cup. In the subsequent edition of the Index, published in 2023, Qatar's position improved to 50th, indicating a modest upward shift in international perceptions (Ipsos, 2023).

2.2 Mega Sporting Events, Soft Power and Nation Branding

Soft power is a country's ability to influence others through attraction, drawing on culture, values, and policies rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). Even before nation branding emerged as a formal academic field, countries relied on such intangible resources to communicate with international audiences. In this context, mega-sporting events have become prominent platforms for soft power projection and sports diplomacy. Major international sporting events enable countries to raise their visibility, communicate cultural narratives, and advance public diplomacy and nation-branding objectives (Dubinsky, 2019).

Empirical evidence suggests that hosting mega-sporting events can lead to positive shifts in international perception when these events are embedded within broader reputation-building strategies. South Africa's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, for instance, improved global perceptions of the country, enhanced its international credibility, and projected an image of modernity, capability, and hospitality, while also fostering national pride and social cohesion. However, these perceptual gains were not automatically sustained, highlighting the importance of deliberate post-event strategies in consolidating nation-branding outcomes (Knott et al., 2013). In terms of Russia's broader mega-event strategy, including the Sochi 2014 Olympics and subsequent events such as the 2018 World Cup, it demonstrates that these occasions were used predominantly to reinforce domestic nation-building narratives and political legitimacy rather than to achieve lasting improvements in external reputation. As a result, the reputational benefits associated with hosting the World Cup were difficult to sustain beyond the event itself (Kramareva, 2018). This underscores the contingent and non-linear nature of soft power outcomes. Recent comparative research on several World Cup host countries, such as South Africa, Russia, Brazil, Germany, and Qatar, also shows that the soft power and nation-branding effects of mega-sporting events depend heavily on the context and vary across different geopolitical settings (Barbu and Nicolescu, 2023). This demands further research on the impact of the World Cup in Qatar, a country whose nation-branding outcomes remain underexplored in the empirical literature despite the scale of global exposure generated by the event.

Much of the research on mega-sporting events and soft power continues to focus on broad outcomes such as international visibility, media coverage, and diplomatic status, often relying on secondary data or elite perspectives (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; El-Dabt et al., 2025; Grix et al., 2021). Recent work finds that there is still little systematic, perception-based evidence, especially outside Western countries, on the impact such an event could make on the nation brand (Kramareva, 2018). Perceptions are crucial for nation branding because national images are shaped and challenged through people's opinions, not just by measurable results (Dinnie, 2015). Changes in how people view a nation after a mega-sporting event are not consistent across all aspects of a country's brand and depend heavily on the specific context and political situation. This shows why more studies of people's perceptions are needed to understand how key parts of a nation's brand are perceived before and after hosting a mega-sporting event, especially in places like Qatar.

2.3 Mega-Sporting Events in GCC Countries

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have increasingly employed mega-sporting events as strategic instruments to enhance their nation brand and international reputation. In 2024, FIFA announced that Saudi Arabia would host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, marking a significant milestone in the Kingdom's long-term branding and soft-power strategy. Hosting such mega-events entails considerable challenges alongside notable opportunities (Brannagan and Reiche, 2025). The decision reflects a growing regional recognition of the branding, visibility, and diplomatic value associated with global sports spectacles. In particular, the perceived success of neighbouring Qatar in hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup appears to have reinforced the strategic importance of mega-sporting events as a nation-branding tool, encouraging other states in the region to pursue similar initiatives.

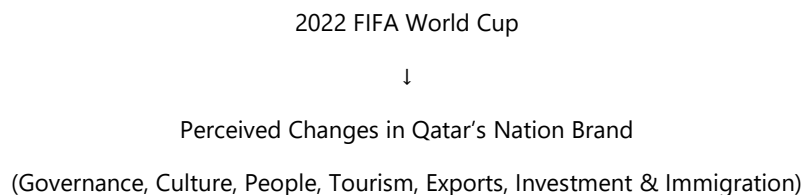
In the United Arab Emirates, hosting major sporting events has played a central role in strengthening the country's national brand and international reputation. Events such as the Formula 1 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix (since 2009), the AFC Asian Cup 2019, and the Dubai World Cup have showcased the UAE as a globally connected, technologically advanced, and politically stable country capable of hosting high-profile international competitions. Beyond their economic and tourism impacts, these events help project an image of modernity, efficiency, openness, and global integration (Anholt, 2007; Grix and Lee, 2013). By embedding itself within global sports calendars and attracting international athletes, media, and audiences, the UAE strategically deploys sport as a soft-power resource to demonstrate competence, ambition, and a future-oriented national vision (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Nye, 2013).

Importantly, these developments are not confined to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have also embraced sport-led branding strategies. Bahrain, for example, has hosted the Bahrain Grand Prix since 2004, positioning itself as an early regional pioneer in motorsport diplomacy (Næss, 2017). Oman has invested in international sailing, endurance sports, and cycling events to promote its image as a destination associated with adventure tourism and cultural

authenticity. Taken together, these cases support the argument that sport-led nation branding in the Gulf operates as a long-term strategic tool embedded within broader public diplomacy, global visibility, and post-oil economic diversification agendas (Ibahrine, 2016).

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The figure below shows the conceptual model we have developed, based on a synthesis of the relevant literature on nation branding, soft power, and the strategic use of mega-sporting events. This model demonstrates how the 2022 FIFA World Cup is expected to influence perceptions of Qatar's nation brand across the key dimensions identified by Anholt's Nation Brand Index.



3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

The present study adopts a positivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is objective and can be measured through observable and quantifiable phenomena (Saunders et al., 2009). Accordingly, quantitative methods were employed to empirically assess perceived changes in Qatar's nation brand following the 2022 FIFA World Cup. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to enable objective measurement of perceptual differences across predefined nation-brand dimensions and to assess statistically perceived changes before and after the mega-sporting event.

3.2 Research Design and Measurement

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to measure perceptions of Qatar across six nation-brand dimensions: governance, culture, people, tourism, exports, and immigration and investment. The measurement structure was informed by the nation-branding literature, particularly perception-based frameworks commonly associated with Anholt's Nation Brand Index, which conceptualise national image as a multidimensional construct (Anholt, 2005; Anholt, 2007).

Each nation-brand dimension was operationalised using three survey items, yielding a total of 18 items. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Respondents were asked to retrospectively evaluate their perceptions of Qatar before and after the FIFA World Cup 2022, enabling within-subject comparisons and allowing the study to assess perceived changes over time attributable to the mega-sporting event.

3.3 Translation Process

To ensure linguistic consistency and conceptual equivalence across respondents, the questionnaire was administered in both English and Armenian. The inclusion of the Armenian language reflects the researcher's institutional affiliation with an Armenian University and facilitated respondent accessibility. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and subsequently translated into Armenian by a professional translator with experience in academic and social science research.

To verify translation accuracy, a back-translation procedure was employed. Back translation involves translating the target-language version back into the source language by an independent translator to confirm semantic and conceptual equivalence between versions (Brislin, 1970). No substantive discrepancies were identified during this process.

3.4 Pilot Study

Before full-scale data collection, a pilot study involving 15 respondents was conducted to assess the clarity, wording, and overall structure of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot study resulted in minor refinements to item phrasing and clarification of selected questions to enhance respondent comprehension and reduce ambiguity. Data from the pilot study were not included in the final analysis.

3.5 Sampling and Data Collection

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed, consistent with perception-based research in marketing and branding studies (Malhotra, 2021). The survey was distributed primarily among university students in Armenia, reflecting the researchers' institutional affiliation, and through collaborative academic networks in the United States to ensure broader international exposure and diversity in respondent backgrounds.

This sampling approach was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on international perceptions rather than national representativeness. To enhance data quality and ensure respondent relevance, three screening questions were incorporated to confirm familiarity with Qatar, awareness of the FIFA World Cup 2022, and engagement with related media coverage.

3.6 Data Screening and Final Sample

A total of 270 responses were initially collected through the online survey. Before analysis, the dataset underwent a structured data screening process to ensure respondent relevance and data completeness. First, 12 responses (4.4%) were excluded based on insufficient familiarity with Qatar. Second, 18 responses (6.7%) were excluded for indicating a lack of awareness that Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Third, 15 responses (5.6%) were removed due to minimal or no engagement with the FIFA World Cup 2022 and related media coverage. In addition, 24 responses (8.9%) were excluded due to incomplete survey submissions.

Following this screening process, 201 valid responses (74.4%) met all inclusion criteria and were retained for statistical analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1: Data Screening

Screening Stage	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Total responses collected	270	100%
Excluded: Low familiarity with Qatar	12	4.4%
Excluded: Not aware of FIFA World Cup 2022	18	6.7%
Excluded: Did not follow FIFA World Cup 2022	15	5.6%
Excluded: Incomplete responses	24	8.9%
Valid responses retained for analysis	201	74.4%

3.7 Reliability of the Instrument

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each nation-brand dimension before and after the FIFA World Cup 2022. As shown in Table 3, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.97 to 0.98 across all dimensions, exceeding recommended thresholds for scale reliability and indicating excellent internal consistency (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). Although the alpha values are high, this is consistent with perception-based constructs measured using closely related items and does not indicate redundancy at the dimensional level. These results support the use of composite scores in subsequent analyses.

Table 2: Reliability of the Instrument

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha
Before FIFA World Cup 2022	
Exports	0.98
Governance	0.98
Culture	0.98
People	0.98
Tourism	0.98
Immigration and Investment	0.98
Overall	0.97
After FIFA World Cup 2022	
Exports	0.98
Governance	0.98
Culture	0.98
People	0.98
Tourism	0.98

Immigration and Investment	0.98
Overall	0.97

3.8 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were first generated to summarise respondent demographics and examine the distribution of key variables. Internal consistency of the multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Composite mean scores were computed for each nation-brand dimension for both pre-event and post-event perceptions. Paired-samples t-tests were employed to examine statistically significant differences between perceptions before and after the FIFA World Cup 2022. Difference scores (post-event minus pre-event) were also calculated to assess the direction and magnitude of perceived change across dimensions. All statistical tests were conducted using two-tailed significance levels.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the research's academic purpose before participating. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were analysed in aggregate form to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The minimum age for participation was set at 18 years to comply with international ethical standards and to avoid including minors.

4.0 Results

4.1 Demographics

The final sample comprised 201 respondents, with a diverse demographic profile aligned with the study's international focus. Table 2 shows that participants were aged 18–44 years (79.6%), indicating a strong representation of younger and mid-career individuals likely to engage with global sporting events and media coverage. The majority of respondents resided in North America (62.2%), followed by Europe (17.9%) and Asia (10.9%), reflecting a predominantly Western but internationally distributed sample. In terms of nationality, American respondents (50.7%) formed the largest group, alongside substantial representation from Armenian (21.9%) and other national backgrounds, supporting the study's cross-national perspective. The sample was relatively gender-balanced, with 53.2% male and 46.3% female participants. Occupationally, respondents were mainly from the private sector (35.8%) and students (28.9%), with additional representation from government and self-employed roles, aligning with the study's focus on perceptions among economically and socially active populations.

Table 3: Demographic Information of the Study

Demographics		Frequency	Percent
Age (Years)	18-24	65	32.3
	25-34	46	22.9
	35-44	49	24.4
	45-54	28	13.9
	55+	13	6.5
Region	Middle East	2	1.0
	Europe	36	17.9
	North America	125	62.2
	Asia	22	10.9
	Oceania	1	.5
	Other	15	7.5
Nationality	American	102	50.7
	Armenian	44	21.9
	Bahraini	2	1.0
	British	6	3.0
	Canadian	8	4.0
	Chinese	8	4.0
	English	2	1.0
	Irish	1	.5

Gender	Italian	2	1.0
	Mexican	5	2.5
	New Zeal	1	.5
	Nicaragua	1	.5
	Pakistan	5	2.5
	Palestine	3	1.5
	Saudi	2	1.0
	Swiss	2	1.0
	Vietnamese	3	1.5
	Yemeni	4	2.0
Gender	Male	107	53.2
	Female	93	46.3
Occupation	Prefer not to say	1	.5
	Academic	8	4.0
Occupation	disabled	1	.5
	Entrepreneur	1	.5
	Government	19	9.5
	Healthcare	2	1.0
	Housewife	4	2.0
	Online freelancer	1	.5
	Private	72	35.8
	Project Management	1	.5
	Retired	10	5.0
	Self-employed	20	10.0
	Stay at home	1	.5
	Student	58	28.9
	Unemployed	3	1.5
	Total	201	100.0

4.2 Data Analysis (Research Questions)

RQ-1: To what extent did perceptions of Qatar change following the FIFA World Cup 2022?

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare respondents' overall perception of Qatar before and after the FIFA World Cup 2022, as shown in Table 4. The results revealed a statistically significant increase in overall perceptions following the event ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.38$, $SD = 0.84$; $M_{\text{after}} = 3.47$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(190) = -3.12$, $p = .002$. This indicates that respondents' general evaluations of Qatar improved after the World Cup. However, the magnitude of this change was modest (Cohen's $d \approx 0.23$), suggesting that while the shift in perceptions was reliable, it reflected an incremental rather than transformative change in Qatar's overall nation brand.

Table 4: Paired Sample Test

Pairs	Groups	Mean	STD	Mean Difference	t	Sig.
Pair 1	Before Overall	3.38	0.84	0.09	-3.12	0.002
	After Overall	3.47	0.85			

RQ2: Which nation-brand dimensions exhibited the greatest perceived change following the FIFA World Cup 2022?

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare respondents' perceptions of Qatar's nation-brand dimension before and after the FIFA World Cup 2022, as shown in Table 5. The results indicate that the most pronounced improvements were observed in people, culture, and governance, all of which exhibited statistically significant positive shifts. Perceptions related to people increased notably ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.38$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.51$; $t = -3.01$, $p < .001$), indicating more favourable views of hospitality, friendliness, and safety. Similarly, perceptions of culture improved significantly ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.53$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.66$; $t = -3.63$, $p < .001$), reflecting enhanced recognition of Qatar's cultural heritage and global cultural presence. Improvements in governance were also significant ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.23$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.35$; $t = -3.32$, $p < .001$), suggesting strengthened evaluations of political stability and governance quality following the event. In comparison, tourism perceptions showed a statistically significant but more modest increase ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.28$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.37$; $t = -2.02$, $p = .05$), indicating a smaller magnitude of change in destination

attractiveness. By contrast, perceptions of exports increased only marginally and did not reach statistical significance ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.33$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.41$; $t = -1.73$, $p = .08$), while immigration and investment perceptions remained unchanged ($M_{\text{before}} = 3.46$, $M_{\text{after}} = 3.46$; $t = -0.27$, $p = .79$). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the most significant perceived changes were concentrated in socio-cultural and governance-related dimensions, whereas economically oriented dimensions were largely unaffected by the event.

Table 5: Paired Sample T-Test on Nation-Brand Dimensions

Pairs	Groups	Mean	STD	Mean Difference	t	Sig.
Pair 1	Before Exports	3.33	0.90	0.07	-1.73	0.08
	After Exports	3.41	0.91			
Pair 2	Before Governance	3.23	0.96	0.12	-3.32	0.00
	After Governance	3.35	0.93			
Pair 3	Before Culture	3.53	0.88	0.12	-3.63	0.00
	After Culture	3.66	0.90			
Pair 4	Before People	3.38	0.90	0.13	-3.01	0.00
	After People	3.51	0.86			
Pair 5	Before Tourism	3.28	1.08	0.09	-2.02	0.05
	After Tourism	3.37	1.02			
Pair 6	Before Immigration	3.46	0.96	0.09	-0.27	0.79
	After Immigration	3.46	0.94			

RQ-3: How do respondents describe the direction and magnitude of perceived change?

The descriptive analysis of difference scores in Table 6 indicates that respondents perceived overall positive shifts across most nation-brand dimensions following the FIFA World Cup 2022. However, the magnitude of these changes varied. Mean difference scores were positive for culture ($M = 0.124$), people ($M = 0.129$), and governance ($M = 0.116$), indicating the greatest perceived improvements in the socio-cultural and institutional domains. These changes, while modest in absolute terms, suggest that respondents noticed meaningful improvements in Qatar's cultural visibility, social openness, and image of governance after the event. Perceptions of tourism also shifted positively ($M = 0.086$), though the more minor mean difference reflects a more limited increase in destination attractiveness.

In contrast, changes in exports were minimal ($M = 0.071$), indicating only marginal improvement in perceptions of products and services. Most notably, perceptions related to immigration and investment remained effectively stable ($M = 0.009$), suggesting negligible perceived change in economic and employment-related evaluations. The observed standard deviations across dimensions indicate considerable individual variation in responses, underscoring that perceptual changes were not uniform across respondents. Overall, the direction of change was predominantly positive. Still, the magnitude was small and domain-specific, with the most discernible shifts occurring in people, culture, and governance rather than in economically oriented dimensions.

Table 6: Mean Difference of Dimensions

Dimensions	Minimum	Maximum	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation
Exports	-1.33	2.00	0.07	0.58
Governance	-1.33	2.33	0.12	0.50
Culture	-1.00	1.33	0.12	0.49
People	-2.00	2.33	0.13	0.61
Tourism	-2.00	2.00	0.09	0.61
Immigration and Investment	-2.67	1.33	0.01	0.45

5.0 Discussion

This research was conducted to understand whether perceptions of Qatar changed among international people following the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and to assess the extent of the impact, based on the six dimensions of Anholt's Nation Brand Index (NBI): exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and immigration and investment.

5.1 Overall Impact of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

The results show that the international audience viewed Qatar more positively after the 2022 FIFA World Cup. While the improvement was not significant, it was steady and positive, meaning the event helped boost Qatar's international image in a small but meaningful way. This supports soft power theory, which emphasises attraction and gradual influence rather than quick or dramatic changes. From this perspective, the World Cup served more as a boost to Qatar's reputation than a complete rebranding.

These findings support earlier research showing that Mega sporting events rarely change a country's image on their own. Instead, they usually highlight existing stories, raise visibility, and lead to short- or medium-term changes in how people see the country. To make these changes last, ongoing efforts are needed after the event. For Qatar, the World Cup made the country more familiar and visible internationally, but it did not completely change how people viewed the nation's overall brand.

5.2 Variation in Effects Across Nation Brand Index Dimensions

A key contribution of this study is its dimension-level analysis, which reveals that perceptual changes did not occur uniformly across the nation-brand framework. The most notable improvements were found in the dimensions of people, culture, and governance. This pattern corresponds with the typical features of mega-sporting events, which highlight host societies, cultural representation, organisational capability, and public engagement through extensive global media coverage. Previous research on FIFA World Cup hosts, such as South Africa (2010) and Germany (2006), also reports short-term enhancements in international perceptions, particularly regarding visibility, familiarity, and social image, but provides limited evidence of lasting reputational transformation (Grix and Lee, 2013; Knott et al., 2013). The current findings build on this literature by showing that these incremental and selective effects are present in a non-Western, small-state context, supporting the view that mega-events serve as reputational catalysts rather than comprehensive nation-branding strategies.

Improved perceptions of people suggest that the World Cup fostered more favourable views of hospitality, safety, and social openness. This outcome aligns with previous research indicating that both direct and mediated exposure to host populations during global sporting events can humanise nations, reduce social distance, and challenge existing stereotypes (Dubinsky, 2019). Similarly, the significant enhancement in cultural perceptions reflects greater recognition of Qatar's cultural heritage and international cultural presence. These changes are consistent with studies emphasising the influence of cultural programming, ceremonial performances, and symbolic storytelling in shaping global narratives during mega-sporting events (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Grix and Lee, 2013). The extensive global media coverage of the tournament likely amplified these cultural signals, resulting in more nuanced cultural evaluations.

The positive change observed in governance perceptions is particularly significant, given that governance is often regarded as a relatively stable and resistant dimension of national image. The findings suggest that Qatar's successful delivery of a complex global event may have strengthened perceptions of institutional competence, organisational capacity, and political stability. This supports previous arguments that mega-sporting events can serve as symbolic demonstrations of state capability and administrative effectiveness, especially for smaller or non-Western states seeking international legitimacy and recognition (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Van Ham, 2001). In contrast, economically oriented dimensions such as exports, immigration, and investment exhibited minimal perceptual change. This outcome is consistent with prior research indicating that economic perceptions evolve more gradually and are less directly influenced by short-term, symbolic events (Dinnie, 2015; Kramareva, 2018). Unlike perceptions of culture or people, evaluations of exports, employment opportunities, and investment climate are typically shaped by sustained engagement, market experience, and long-term economic performance rather than episodic global exposure. The absence of significant change in these dimensions, therefore, highlights the structural limitations of mega-sporting events as instruments for influencing economically grounded evaluations of national image.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study advance the nation-branding and soft-power literature by offering empirical evidence for a multidimensional and non-linear model of reputation change. The results support the view that nation brands comprise distinct, yet interrelated, dimensions that exhibit varied responses to branding interventions.

The study demonstrates that socio-cultural and governance dimensions are more responsive to mega-sporting events than economic dimensions, thereby refining existing theoretical models of sport-led nation branding. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of mega-events should be assessed by targeted perceptual changes within specific domains, rather than by overall brand transformation. This approach challenges assumptions regarding the automatic reputational benefits of hosting global sports events and underscores the need to align event strategies with realistic branding objectives.

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings have significant implications for policymakers and nation-branding practitioners in Qatar and internationally. The results indicate that mega-sporting events are most effective when used to enhance cultural visibility, social image, and perceptions of governance competence. However, such events are unlikely to yield immediate improvements in economic reputation without the support of long-term policies and comprehensive communication strategies.

For Qatar, these findings highlight an opportunity to consolidate perceptual gains in people, culture, and governance through ongoing public diplomacy, tourism promotion, and cultural exchange initiatives. For other Gulf Cooperation Council countries adopting similar approaches, the results provide a cautionary perspective. Although mega-events can increase visibility and soft power, their reputational benefits are selective and necessitate sustained strategic efforts beyond the event itself.

6.0 Conclusion

This study examined perceived changes in Qatar's nation brand following the 2022 FIFA World Cup, focusing on how key nation-brand dimensions were evaluated by an international audience before and after the event. Using a perception-based quantitative design informed by Anholt's Nation Brand Index, the research provides empirical insight into the soft-power effects of hosting a mega-sporting event in a small, non-Western state.

The findings indicate a statistically significant but modest improvement in Qatar's overall international image after the World Cup. Perceptual gains were most evident in the dimensions of people, culture, and governance, while economically oriented dimensions such as exports, immigration, and investment remained unchanged. These results suggest that the World Cup served as a reputational enhancer rather than a transformative nation-branding intervention, producing selective, domain-specific effects.

The study contributes to the literature on nation branding and sports diplomacy by reinforcing the multidimensional and uneven nature of reputation change following mega-sporting events. By providing perception-based evidence from the Gulf region, the research addresses a gap in empirical studies that have predominantly focused on Western or large host nations. The findings highlight that socio-cultural and symbolic dimensions of national image are more responsive to event-driven exposure than structural economic perceptions.

The findings show that while mega-sporting events can enhance visibility and soft power, their impact on national image is neither automatic nor uniform. Sustainable nation branding requires long-term strategic alignment between events, policy initiatives, and international communication to convert short-term exposure into enduring reputational benefits.

6.1 Research Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, reliance on convenience sampling and retrospective evaluation may limit the generalisability of the findings and introduce recall bias. Second, the predominantly Western sample may have shaped the perceptions captured, thereby restricting the results' applicability to non-Western contexts. Third, the cross-sectional design offers only a single temporal snapshot, precluding analysis of how nation-brand perceptions develop or stabilise over extended periods.

6.2 Avenues for Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to track perceptual changes over multiple years, thereby enabling a more robust assessment of the durability of mega-sporting event impacts. Additionally, studies incorporating more geographically and culturally diverse samples would enhance external validity. Mixed-method approaches, combining perception-based surveys with media framing analysis or qualitative interviews, could provide deeper insight into the mechanisms by which mega-sporting events influence national image. Comparative research across Gulf Cooperation Council states would further elucidate regional similarities and differences in sport-led nation-branding strategies.

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