

SPORT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOFT POWER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines sport as a contemporary instrument of soft power in international relations, emphasizing its role in public diplomacy, global positioning, and the shaping of international perceptions. Building upon theoretical frameworks of diplomacy and soft power, the study explores sport as a cultural resource, a marker of national identity, and a communicative channel that transcends traditional, primarily political boundaries. The analysis covers three dimensions: 1) sport as a reflection of national identity; 2) sport as a strategic tool of international promotion through mega-events, exchanges, and national sports policies; 3) and the role of athletes as informal ambassadors of their countries. The paper adopts a qualitative interpretative research design grounded in conceptual analysis and comparative illustration. The methodological framework combines three interrelated components: conceptual analysis, thematic qualitative analysis, and comparative case illustration. Drawing on examples from the United Kingdom, Germany, China, Qatar, and Cuba, the paper demonstrates that sport can contribute to a positive international image and strengthen interstate relations. At the same time, it highlights that the effectiveness of sport as an instrument of soft power depends on the political context, media narratives, and long-term national strategies. The paper concludes that sport has become an increasingly significant and sophisticated instrument of soft power. By combining universal values, emotional appeal, and global visibility, sport has emerged as one of the most influential resources of contemporary public diplomacy.

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Keywords: soft power, diplomacy, sports diplomacy, national image, international relations

SPORT KAO INSTRUMENT MEKE MOĆI

APSTRAKT

U radu se razmatra uloga sporta kao savremenog instrumenta meke moći u međunarodnim odnosima, sa posebnim osvrtom na njegov značaj u javnoj diplomatiji, globalnom pozicioniranju i oblikovanju međunarodnih percepcija. Polazeći od teorijskog okvira diplomatije i meke moći, sport se sagledava kao kulturni resurs, izraz nacionalnog identiteta i kao komunikacioni kanal koji prevazilazi tradicionalne, pre svega političke granice. Analiza je usmerena na tri dimenzije: 1) sport kao odraz nacionalnog identiteta; 2) sport kao strateško sredstvo za međunarodnu promociju, prvenstveno kroz sportske megadogađaje; i 3) sportisti kao neformalni ambasadori svojih zemalja. Metodološki okvir rada zasnovan je na kvalitativnom istraživačkom pristupu koji objedinjuje konceptualnu analizu, tematski kvalitativnu analizu i uporednu analizu slučajeva. Na osnovu iskustava Ujedinjenog Kraljevstva, Nemačke, Kine, Katara i Kube, dolazi se do zaključka da sport može doprineti izgradnji pozitivnog međunarodnog imidža i unapređenju međudržavnih odnosa, pri čemu njegov efikasnosti zavisi od političkog konteksta, medijskih narativa i dugoročnih državnih strategija. Na kraju se zaključuje da je sport značajan i sve složeniji oblik „meke moći“, naročito zahvaljujući tome što kombinuje univerzalne vrednosti, emocije i globalnu vidljivost, zbog čega se opravdano može smatrati jednim od najuticajnijih resursa moderne javne diplomatije.

Ključne reči: meka moć, diplomatija, sportska diplomatija, nacionalni imidž, međunarodni odnosi.

Introduction

Over the past decades, sport has emerged as one of the most visible and influential forms of global social communication. Globalization has strengthened the links between sport and various dimensions of social and economic development, leading to its recognition as a powerful instrument for promoting social inclusion, education, public health, and gender equality (Zbiljić, Perović, & Đurić, 2025). Its symbolic and cultural significance now extends well beyond recreation and competition, positioning sport as an increasingly important component of contemporary international relations. Within this context, sport has increasingly become a means through which states seek to enhance their international visibility and influence. In a globalized environment characterized by extensive media coverage, the growing influence of public opinion, and the increasing importance of non-coercive forms of power, states have turned to alternative channels for shaping

international perceptions and promoting their national values and interests. Despite the growing recognition of sport's strategic potential, the role of sport as a source of soft power in foreign policy remains an expanding yet still underexplored area of research (Jarvie, 2024).

First introduced by Joseph S. Nye more than three decades ago, the concept of *soft power* has become highly influential in both academic scholarship and policy discourse (Vuving, 2009). In his original formulation, Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 1990) and, more recently, as a deliberate instrument of great-power competition capable of shaping international norms and institutions (Nye, 2023). Although Nye (2011) acknowledges that certain situations require the use of *hard power*, defined as "the ability to get desired outcomes through coercion or payment," he argues that soft power is most effective when combined with military and economic capabilities in a *smart power* strategy that integrates attraction with material leverage (Nye, 2023). Accordingly, Nye distinguishes three dimensions of power: military power, economic power, and soft power. Unlike military and economic power, soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others by attracting rather than coercing them (Berenskoetter & Williams, 2007). Building on Nye's conceptualization, other scholars define soft power as the ability to influence the preferences and behaviour of others through attraction rather than through financial incentives or military force (Dubinsky, 2019; Lukes, 2007). Within this framework, culture, political values, and peaceful forms of international engagement constitute the principal sources of soft power.

In the international arena, sport has emerged as an effective instrument of soft power, enabling states to pursue foreign policy objectives and strengthen their public diplomacy. Sport is therefore closely associated with public diplomacy, understood as communication with foreign publics aimed at fostering trust, mutual understanding, and long-term relationships (Cull, 2008). Owing to its global popularity and strong emotional appeal, sport has the capacity to shape how foreign audiences perceive particular states and societies. Unlike traditional diplomatic instruments, sport operates primarily through symbolism, narratives, and shared experiences rather than through explicit political messaging.

Mega sporting events, international competitions, bilateral sporting exchanges, and internationally recognized athletes provide states with opportunities to project an image that is perceived as accessible, non-threatening, and authentic. As Pavlović (2023) observes, newly independent or internationally marginalized states frequently use sport to gain international recognition and legitimacy, whereas established powers employ it to reinforce their international status and influence.

The aim of this paper is to examine sport as an instrument of soft power within

the broader framework of diplomacy and international communication. Accordingly, the paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How does sport function as a cultural marker of national identity? (2) How does sport contribute to the construction of national soft power? (3) Which factors and mechanisms determine the effectiveness of sport as an instrument of soft power and the role of athletes as informal ambassadors?

Method

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretative research design based on conceptual analysis and comparative case illustration. Given the nature of the research questions, which examine sport as an instrument of soft power within international relations, the study does not seek to quantify causal relationships. Instead, it seeks to explore patterns of meaning, representation, and the strategic use of sport in diplomatic contexts. This methodological approach is consistent with established methodological approaches in the fields of public diplomacy and soft power studies (Nye, 1990; Cull, 2008; Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

The methodological framework combines three interrelated components:

- (1) conceptual analysis,
- (2) thematic qualitative analysis, and
- (3) comparative case illustration.

First, the study employs conceptual analysis to clarify the theoretical foundations of soft power and public diplomacy. The study builds primarily on Nye's definition of soft power as "the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 1990) and on Cull's taxonomy of public diplomacy, which identifies cultural diplomacy, exchange programmes, and relationship-building as key mechanisms of international influence (Cull, 2008). Within this theoretical framework, sport is examined as a cultural phenomenon capable of shaping perceptions through symbolism, public visibility, and media communication.

Second, the paper employs a thematic qualitative analysis of the existing literature on international relations, sport studies, and diplomacy. The analysis focuses on key themes, including national identity formation, symbolic capital, media mediation, and legitimacy in international communication. The works of Giulianotti and Robertson (2007), Houlihan and Giulianotti (2012), and Abdi et al. (2018) are used to identify recurring analytical patterns concerning the political and diplomatic functions of sport. This analytical approach enables the comparison of recurring patterns across different national contexts without assuming that all cases operate according to the same mechanisms.

Third, the study adopts a comparative case analysis to illustrate how sport-based soft power operates in practice. The cases of the United Kingdom

(London 2012), Germany (FIFA World Cup 2006), China (Beijing 2008), Qatar (FIFA World Cup 2022), and Cuba (sport exchanges and international cooperation) were selected through purposive sampling because they represent diverse political systems, levels of economic development, geopolitical positions, and strategic approaches to the use of sport in foreign policy. Collectively, these cases illustrate a broad spectrum of sport-based soft power strategies, ranging from liberal democracies to more centralized political systems.

The purpose of these case studies is not to provide an exhaustive comparison but rather to offer analytical illustrations of the different ways in which sport is integrated into national soft power strategies (Grix & Houlihan, 2013; Huish, Carter, & Darnell, 2013).

Importantly, the analysis remains interpretative rather than normative. The paper does not assess whether sport-based strategies are morally justified or politically desirable. Instead, it examines how such strategies function as instruments of international influence and how they are perceived by foreign publics. This methodological approach is consistent with contemporary scholarship, which conceptualizes sports diplomacy as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon rather than as a uniform instrument of foreign policy (Grix & Brannagan, 2024).

Results: Sport as a Resource of Soft Power

Sport and National Identity

Sport represents one of the most recognizable expressions of national identity in contemporary societies. National teams, iconic athletes, and historic sporting achievements often serve as powerful symbols of a nation's collective values, traditions, and aspirations. According to Giulianotti and Robertson (2007), sport operates as a "glocalized" phenomenon, simultaneously universal in form while remaining locally embedded in meaning. This dual character enables states to project distinctive national narratives through sporting practices that are globally recognized and understood.

Sporting success frequently generates collective emotions that transcend social, political, and ethnic divisions, thereby reinforcing social cohesion while simultaneously shaping international perceptions. Media representations play a pivotal role in this process by transforming individual athletic performances into narratives of national identity, continuity, and collective achievement (Hutchinson, 2024). Consequently, sport constitutes a form of symbolic capital that states can strategically mobilize in international communication and public diplomacy.

Sport as an Instrument of Soft Power

Sport functions as an instrument of soft power primarily through visibility, emotional engagement, and symbolic association. Unlike coercive forms of

influence, its effectiveness depends on attraction, credibility, and the perceptions of foreign publics. Grix and Brannagan (2024) define sports diplomacy as the strategic use of sport to support foreign policy objectives, enhance a state's international standing, and foster long-term international relationships.

The growing significance of sport within international relations is closely associated with the broader transformation of the concept of security. Whereas security was traditionally understood as an exclusive responsibility of the state, the political, historical, and civilizational changes that occurred during the final decade of the twentieth century fundamentally reshaped both the theory and practice of security, particularly with respect to the concepts of national and international security. Contemporary understandings of security extend well beyond military concerns to encompass political, economic, social, cultural, and human dimensions (Milosavljević et al., 2016). As the concept of security has expanded, culture, communication, and sport have likewise gained prominence as important subjects of international relations research.

Mega sporting events represent one of the most visible manifestations of sport-based soft power. The London 2012 Olympic Games enabled the United Kingdom to promote narratives of inclusivity, multiculturalism, and organizational competence (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). Germany's hosting of the 2006 FIFA World Cup contributed to the country's rebranding as an open, modern, and welcoming society. China's hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games projected an image of economic strength, technological advancement, and national cohesion, while Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup formed part of a broader strategy to enhance its global visibility and strengthen its geopolitical position.

A contemporary example is the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will be jointly hosted by Canada, Mexico, and the United States. As the first FIFA World Cup to be hosted by three countries and the largest tournament in the competition's history, it is expected to provide an important platform for projecting regional cooperation, organizational capacity, and international visibility. Although its long-term diplomatic and soft power effects remain to be assessed, the tournament illustrates the continuing strategic importance that states attach to hosting major international sporting events. Accordingly, the official brand and campaign, known as *WE ARE 26*, symbolizes the unprecedented unity of the three host nations, Canada, Mexico, and the United States, united through football, offering a canvas for each host city and nation to highlight its own unique culture (FIFA, 2023).

Beyond mega sporting events, bilateral and multilateral sports exchanges play an important role in sustaining the long-term effects of soft power. Training programmes, coaching cooperation, youth exchanges, and sport-for-development initiatives contribute to building trust, strengthening interpersonal connections, and fostering durable international relationships.

Cuba provides an illustrative example of this approach through its decades-long practice of sports internationalism, using athletic expertise, professional training, and exchange programmes as instruments for developing diplomatic relations across Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Huish, Carter, & Darnell, 2013).

Athletes as Informal Ambassadors

Globally recognized athletes can significantly influence how foreign audiences perceive the countries they represent. Nye (1990) characterizes prominent individuals as cultural ambassadors whose achievements, public image, and personal conduct contribute to shaping international perceptions of their countries of origin. Unlike official diplomats, athletes engage in indirect forms of communication that may, in some cases, be more persuasive due to their personal narratives, extensive media exposure, and emotional appeal.

The influence of athletes is largely mediated by global media, which amplifies their visibility and constructs narratives linking individual achievements to broader representations of national identity. This form of informal diplomacy cannot be fully controlled by states through formal institutional mechanisms, particularly when athletes are associated with widely valued principles such as fairness, discipline, perseverance, and respect.

Discussion: Interpreting the Effectiveness and Limits of Sports-based Soft Power

The analysis demonstrates that sport constitutes a powerful yet inherently conditional instrument of soft power. The comparative examination of selected cases indicates that the effectiveness of sport-based soft power depends less on financial investment alone and more on the ability to generate credible meanings, symbolic associations, and media narratives that resonate with international audiences. This finding supports Nye's (1990) argument that soft power resources become influential only when they are successfully transformed into attraction, a process dependent on perception, credibility, and consistency.

A key finding emerging from the analysis is that sport functions most effectively as a soft power instrument when integrated into broader public diplomacy strategies. The cases examined in this study suggest that mega-events, including the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups, provide states with significant opportunities for international visibility but do not automatically generate lasting reputational benefits. Their long-term impact depends on the presence of complementary initiatives, such as cultural programmes, exchange activities, and sustained diplomatic engagement. This interpretation is consistent with previous research emphasizing that the diplomatic value of sporting events extends beyond the events themselves (Houlihan & Giulianotti, 2012). The British and German cases further illustrate that coordinated communication strategies, urban regeneration projects, and cultural

programming can enhance and prolong the international impact of sport-based initiatives (Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

The analysis also identifies media mediation as a decisive factor influencing the success or failure of sport-based soft power strategies. While states may attempt to construct particular narratives through sporting events, the international meaning of sport is ultimately shaped through media interpretation and public discourse. Previous research has similarly emphasized that sport functions as a geopolitical spectacle in which states have limited control over the narratives that emerge (Hutchinson, 2024). The findings of this study extend this argument by demonstrating that the credibility of sport-based messaging depends on the alignment between projected national images and broader political realities.

This dynamic is particularly evident in relation to debates surrounding “sportswashing.” Existing scholarship defines sportswashing as the use of sport to promote favourable international narratives that may conflict with other dimensions of state behaviour (Grix & Brannagan, 2024). Building on this perspective, the present study suggests that sportswashing debates reveal a fundamental limitation of sport as a soft power resource: attraction cannot be created solely through visibility, financial investment, or event hosting. When international audiences perceive significant contradictions between sporting narratives and wider political practices, credibility is undermined and the conversion of symbolic resources into soft power becomes less effective (Abdi et al., 2018).

Another important finding concerns the role of athletes as informal diplomatic actors. The cases examined indicate that athletes can significantly contribute to national image-building by embodying values and narratives associated with their countries. However, their influence remains decentralized and difficult for states to manage. This observation corresponds with Nye’s (1990) argument that cultural ambassadors operate outside formal diplomatic structures, creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Consequently, individual controversies, political statements, or reputational challenges may alter the symbolic meaning attached to athletes and affect perceptions of the states they represent.

Finally, the study demonstrates that sport-based soft power is context-dependent rather than universally transferable. The comparative analysis indicates that political culture, historical experience, media environments, and audience expectations significantly shape how sporting initiatives are interpreted internationally. Therefore, the principal contribution of this study is to demonstrate that sport should not be understood as autonomous diplomatic instrument but rather as a strategic resource whose effectiveness depends on its coherence with broader cultural, political, and communication strategies.

Conclusion

Sport occupies a fundamentally different position within contemporary international relations than it did several decades ago. Previously understood primarily as a form of entertainment, recreation, or an arena of national prestige expressed through competitive success, sport has increasingly become connected to diplomacy, international communication, media representation, and the broader projection of state influence. Contemporary international politics is shaped not only by military and economic capabilities but also by the ability of states to influence perceptions, construct attractive narratives, and maintain visibility within global public discourse. Within this context, sport has emerged as an important channel through which states seek to enhance their international image and exercise influence through attraction rather than coercion.

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that sport possesses a number of characteristics that make it particularly suitable as a resource of soft power. Unlike conventional forms of political communication, sport engages international audiences through emotional attachment, symbolic representation, collective identification, and media visibility. International competitions, mega sporting events, and globally recognized athletes frequently attract attention beyond traditional diplomatic institutions and political forums. Consequently, sport enables states to communicate with foreign publics through a medium that is often perceived as less formal, less confrontational, and more accessible. This helps explain the increasing efforts of governments to invest in sporting infrastructure, international competitions, athlete development, and sports diplomacy initiatives as components of broader public diplomacy strategies.

At the same time, the findings of this study indicate that the relationship between sport and soft power is neither automatic nor universally successful. Sporting achievements or investments in major events do not automatically translate into international influence. Rather, the effectiveness of sport-based soft power depends on the political, social, and communicative environment in which sporting initiatives are embedded. Although states may use mega-events and internationally recognized athletes to improve their global image, the outcomes of such strategies are shaped by media interpretation and the perceptions of foreign audiences. The cases examined in this paper demonstrate that sporting initiatives may contribute to narratives of openness, modernization, and organizational competence, as illustrated by examples such as Germany and the United Kingdom. However, they may also generate criticism concerning issues such as political repression, labour conditions, corruption, or attempts to redirect attention from domestic challenges.

Therefore, sport should not be understood as an autonomous mechanism capable of transforming international reputation independently of broader political realities.

A further finding of the analysis concerns the central role of media in shaping the political meaning and international interpretation of sport. Contemporary sport operates within a highly interconnected media environment in which images, narratives, and controversies circulate rapidly across national borders. Although governments may organize sporting events with specific diplomatic objectives, they possess limited ability to fully control how these events are interpreted. Media framing plays a decisive role in determining whether sporting initiatives contribute to positive national representation or expose contradictions between projected images and political practices. This demonstrates that soft power depends not only on visibility but also on credibility. Where a significant gap emerges between symbolic representation and broader social and political realities, the intended diplomatic benefits of sport are likely to be weakened.

The analysis also highlights the importance of athletes as informal actors in international communication. In certain contexts, globally recognized athletes may become highly influential representatives of national identity, sometimes reaching audiences beyond the scope of official diplomatic actors. Their influence derives from personal reputation, media presence, and symbolic associations with values such as discipline, achievement, and perseverance. However, this influence remains decentralized and difficult to institutionalize. Athletes do not operate under direct state control, and their symbolic value may change rapidly as a result of personal conduct, political statements, or media controversies. Consequently, athletes should not be conceptualized as formal diplomatic representatives, but rather as influential individuals whose public visibility can contribute indirectly to processes of national image construction. Another important conclusion concerns the diversity of sports diplomacy models identified through the comparative analysis. The cases examined demonstrate that states employ sport for different strategic purposes depending on their historical experiences, political systems, economic resources, and foreign policy objectives. While some states use sport primarily to reinforce existing international status and influence, others employ it as a means of gaining recognition, increasing visibility, or repositioning themselves within global politics. Accordingly, there is no universally applicable model of successful sports diplomacy; rather, the effectiveness of sport-based soft power remains strongly dependent on political context and international interpretation.

Overall, the findings suggest that sport should be understood as a complementary instrument of contemporary diplomacy rather than a substitute for traditional political and economic tools. Its distinctive value lies in its capacity to generate emotional engagement, symbolic meaning, and international visibility in ways that conventional diplomatic mechanisms often cannot achieve. Nevertheless, the limitations identified in this study demonstrate that attraction cannot be created solely through financial

investment, infrastructure development, or media exposure. Sustainable influence requires consistency between the image projected through sport and the broader political, social, and cultural realities of the state.

In contemporary international relations, where perceptions and legitimacy increasingly influence global positioning, sport is likely to remain an important component of diplomatic practice. Its worldwide appeal, symbolic significance, and communicative potential ensure that it continues to occupy a relevant position not only within the domains of culture and entertainment but also within wider debates concerning power, identity, and international influence.

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