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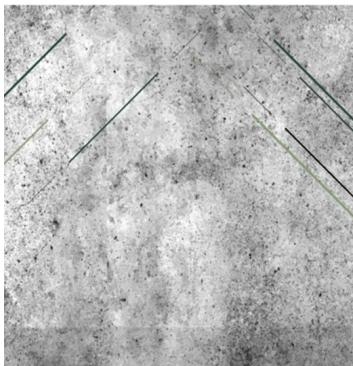
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### Sportwashing or Nation Branding? The Saudi Pro League's Role in Reshaping Global Perceptions of Saudi Arabia

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## Sportwashing or Nation Branding? The Saudi Pro League's Role in Reshaping Global Perceptions of Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

This research examines how the Saudi Pro League (SPL) changed between 2021 and 2024, determining if these efforts are an example of sportwashing or genuine national branding in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification plan. Since 2021, Saudi Arabia has invested over \$6 billion in acquiring international football talents such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar Jr., along with extensive improvements to facilities and broadcasting infrastructure, despite ongoing global criticism of its human rights record following events like the Jamal Khashoggi assassination. This study employs Anholt's nation branding hexagon framework and utilizes a mix methods case study methodology with comparative elements, integrating official documents from Saudi governmental entities, public opinion surveys from the United States and United Kingdom, systematic media content analysis from international sources, tourism statistics, and social media engagement metrics. Findings reveal a complex "strategic sports diplomacy" approach that transcends the basic sportwashing/branding dichotomy, producing uneven results across many strategic objectives. Despite SPL's significant commercial achievements, such as broadcasting rights in over 130 countries, generating over \$300 million in annual revenue, attracting an additional 310,000 tourists, and attaining a 2,650% increase in social media followers, improvements in reputation within Western markets were constrained, particularly among audiences prioritizing human rights concerns. The study illustrates a "Western perception paradox," in which significant visibility improvements (recognition rose from 82% to 94% in the US) did not lead to increased favorability ratings. Demographic analysis reveals notably more favorable perceptions among younger viewers (42% favorability among those under 35 compared to 22% among those over 50), active sports enthusiasts, and non-Western demographics. This study advances theoretical understanding of sports diplomacy by demonstrating how audience segmentation affects effectiveness across demographic, geographic, and cultural dimensions, challenging simplistic evaluations of sports-based nation branding and providing frameworks for analyzing the complex outcomes of contemporary sports diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Nation Branding; Sportwashing; Saudi Pro League; Sports Diplomacy; Soft Power

### Introduction

The evolution of Saudi Arabia's sports environment, especially via the Saudi Pro League (SPL), signifies a paramount advancement in global sports diplomacy in recent years. Since 2021, Saudi Arabia has allocated more than \$6 billion to acquire international football luminaries like as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar Jr., while also obtaining broadcasting rights in 130 countries (GEIST, 2024). This extraordinary investment has elevated the formerly insignificant local league to global prominence, aligning with Saudi Arabia's comprehensive Vision 2030 strategy aimed at reducing economic reliance on oil. The timing of this sports-centric strategy is particularly significant, coinciding with global condemnation of the nation's human rights record, including the 2018 assassination of writer Jamal Khashoggi (Milanovic, 2020) and allegations of migrant worker exploitation (Human Right Watch, 2023). Critics from prominent international

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organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have termed these initiatives "sportswashing," utilizing sports investments to divert attention from human rights issues and restore a tarnished global image (CNBC Indonesia, 2023 & CNN Indonesia, 2023). On the other hand, Saudi Arabian supporters especially from younger generation and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) contend that these efforts represent a valid nation branding strategy aimed at showcasing modernization and economic transformation, while expressing indifference toward such accusations (BBC Sport, 2023). This tension between viewpoints illustrates the intricate convergence of sports, diplomacy, and image management in modern international relations, as athletics increasingly function as instruments for the projection of national identity (Krishna, Portet, & San Eugenio Vela, 2024).

Over the last decade, research on nation branding through sports has grown substantially, emphasizing how governments employ sporting events and institutions as instruments to enhance their international standing. Simon Anholt's (2007) nation branding hexagon offers a detailed framework for comprehending how countries convey their image globally across six dimensions: exports, government, culture, populace, tourism, and investment. Although other studies have explored nation branding via mega-events such as the Olympics and World Cup (Yamin, 2020), the strategic purchase and advancement of domestic sports leagues constitutes a relatively underexplored issue. Notable comparative situations include China's endeavor to enhance the Chinese Super League (CSL) under the "Soccer Dream 2050" policy (Kurscheidt, 2019), which ultimately faced sustainability issues. Ginesta and Eugenio (2014) examined Qatar's football-centric nation branding in anticipation of the 2022 World Cup, with a primary emphasis on media portrayals. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's strategy markedly varies in magnitude, velocity, and alignment with comprehensive economic reform initiatives. Murray (2018) contends that has evolved from basic goodwill exchanges into complex strategic instruments of statecraft, indicating that the distinction between sportswashing and nation branding may lie not in their purpose but in their long-term efficacy and sustainability. However, the literature has inadequately explored how enduring sporting institutions, such as domestic leagues, serve as long-term nation branding platforms rather than merely one-time events. The Saudi scenario presents a distinctive chance to analyze how continuous investment in local sports infrastructure may more effectively alter foreign attitudes than transient mega-events (Mutz, 2024).

Against this background, this study critically examines the influence of the Saudi Pro League (SPL) on global perceptions of Saudi Arabia from 2021 to 2024. It seeks to address the central research question: To what extent does the Saudi Pro League serve as a tool for enhancing Saudi Arabia's international image through sports?. The research specifically assesses SPL's role in transforming Saudi Arabia's image by utilizing Anholt's nation branding hexagon framework, evaluating effects across all six dimensions. This study offers a thorough evaluation of the efficacy of Saudi Arabia's sports-oriented nation branding strategy by examining media discourse, tourism statistics, investment trends, and public opinion surveys from the United States and the United Kingdom. The article aims to cultivate a more refined comprehension of the differentiation between sportswashing and strategic nation branding by formulating evaluative criteria grounded in sustainability, alignment with comprehensive economic reforms, and quantifiable effects on global attitudes.

This paper's main contention is that Saudi Arabia's investment in the Saudi Pro League is an inventive hybrid strategy that defies easy classification as either sportswashing or traditional nation branding. Rather, it is an emerging type of "strategic sports diplomacy" with unique traits and goals. Although aspects of sportswashing are apparent in the timing and magnitude of investments following human rights issues, the SPL program concurrently addresses all six facets of Anholt's nation branding hexagon in ways that transcend ordinary reputation management. Tourism data indicating a rise in leisure visits to Saudi Arabia (Visit Saudi, 2024), broadcasting agreements spanning 130 countries (Ross, 2022), and the incorporation of football development within wider economic diversification initiatives imply a complex strategy rather than a mere diversionary tactic. Survey data from Western nations indicates enduring negative attitudes

despite heightened visibility, with merely 11% of British respondents expressing favorable opinions and ongoing negative sentiment among Americans (Gallup, 2025; YouGov UK, 2025). This paradoxical result—increased global visibility coupled with enduring negative Western perceptions—indicates that Saudi Arabia has been more effective in establishing presence than in altering attitudes within established democracies, while potentially attaining greater reputational advantages in non-Western markets. The study posits that the efficacy of sports-oriented nation branding is influenced by existing political affiliations and value congruence between target demographics and the branding nation, resulting in unequal effects across various geographical locations (Elshaer, 2023).

## Method

The Saudi Pro League (SPL) serves as the primary analytical unit in this study, with an emphasis on its transformation as a tool for Saudi Arabia's nation branding within the temporal scope of 2021 to 2024—period that marked the league's most significant institutional and commercial evolution. The SPL exemplifies a noteworthy example for examination owing to its extraordinary transformation from a regional contest into a worldwide athletic entity including international luminaries and extensive broadcasting capabilities. By analyzing this evolution, we may discern how a domestic sports institution is integrated into a broader national strategy framework—Saudi Vision 2030—while concurrently fulfilling diplomatic and image-enhancement goals. The study meticulously examines the SPL via Anholt's (2007) nation branding hexagon, assessing the league's impact on each dimension: exports (via broadcasting rights and merchandising), governance (through institutional management frameworks), culture (by embodying Saudi values), people (through the involvement of Saudi citizens and international celebrities), tourism (by drawing visitors), and investment (through commercial alliances and infrastructure enhancement). This analytical framework facilitates a systematic evaluation of the league's function within Saudi Arabia's overarching reputational management strategy, while offering established criteria to differentiate between sportwashing and strategic nation branding.

In-depth examination of the intricate connection between sports, diplomacy, and nation branding within a particular modern setting is made possible by the research's use of a mix methods case study design with comparative components. This methodology is especially suitable as the research seeks to comprehend the "how" and "why" of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy strategy, rather than merely quantifying outcomes (Yin, 2018). The case study is temporally constrained (2021-2024) to encompass the era of most substantial transformation in the SPL, facilitating process tracing of pivotal developments and their influence on foreign perceptions. The research design includes discourse analysis of international media coverage to evaluate how the SPL's development has been framed and understood globally, offering insights into the efficacy of Saudi Arabia's nation branding initiatives among various international audiences.

The data for this study is sourced from many origins to guarantee thorough coverage and triangulation. Primary sources comprise official documents from Saudi governmental entities (publications related to Saudi Vision 2030, reports from the Public Investment Fund, strategic plans of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation), corporate reports from the Saudi Pro League and associated clubs, broadcasting contracts, and official tourism statistics from the Saudi Ministry of Tourism for the years 2021-2024. Secondary sources include academic literature on nation branding and sports washing international media coverage from various outlets (BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and prominent sports publications), public opinion surveys (Gallup Poll USA 2025, YouGov UK 2025), and expert analyses from the fields of international relations and sports management. The research additionally includes quantitative data regarding attendance statistics, broadcasting reach, social media engagement metrics for SPL teams and players, and travel trends to Saudi Arabia throughout the study period. In other words, a mixed-methods approach is also adopted in this research. The combination allows for both interpretive understanding and empirical validation of the Saudi Pro League's influence on global perceptions. This multifaceted

multifaceted strategy regarding data sources facilitates the cross-validation of results while elucidating both the strategic objectives of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy and its reception among various international audiences.

The data gathering technique employed a methodical strategy aimed at guaranteeing thorough and equitable coverage of the study inquiries. A comprehensive examination of scholarly literature about nation branding, sports diplomacy, and Middle Eastern politics established the theoretical framework and revealed gaps in knowledge. Secondly, official documents were obtained directly from Saudi government websites and through formal requests to pertinent agencies, guaranteeing access to genuine strategic planning resources. Third, international media coverage was obtained via a systematic search protocol utilizing Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases, employing standardized search terms ("Saudi Pro League," "Saudi football," "Saudi sports investment," "sportswashing") across comparable time frames (January 2021-December 2024) to ensure representativeness and mitigate selection bias. Fourth, public opinion data was acquired from original survey reports and enhanced using trend analysis contrasting impressions before and after 2021. Ultimately, social media and attendance data were gathered from official league publications and independent sports analytics companies. During the collection process, careful consideration was given to achieving balanced coverage of both critical and supportive viewpoints of Saudi Arabia's sports endeavors, while remaining cognizant of potential biases inherent in various source types.

Anholt's (2007) nation branding hexagon framework serves as a guide for the qualitative content analysis used in the analytical approach, which systematically codes the materials gathered based on how relevant they are to each of the following dimensions: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and investment. This framework-based categorization facilitates a systematic comparison of SPL's impact on each dimension, while also discerning patterns within the overarching nation branding approach. The analysis unfolds in multiple phases: initially, a chronological mapping of significant developments in SPL transformation; subsequently, a thematic analysis of official documents to discern strategic intent; thirdly, a discourse analysis of international media coverage to evaluate reception and framing; fourthly, a comparative analysis with China's CSL initiative to highlight unique aspects of the Saudi approach; and ultimately, a synthesis of findings to assess the efficacy of SPL as a nation branding instrument among diverse international audiences. This study enhances analytical rigor by utilizing researcher triangulation, wherein multiple coders independently analyze key documents before comparing interpretations, and methodological triangulation, which incorporates quantitative metrics (attendance figures, tourism statistics, social media engagement) alongside qualitative analysis. The study recognizes limitations such as possible bias in official documents and difficulties in establishing causal relationships between SPL development and shifts in international perceptions, addressing these through transparent reporting of constraints and meticulous claims regarding correlation versus causation.

## Results

### *India and Strategic Delay in the Clean Energy Cess Transforming a Regional League into a Global Sports Brand: The Commercialization Strategy of Saudi Pro League (2021-2024)*

The Saudi Pro League experienced a significant metamorphosis from 2021 to 2024, turning from a little-known regional league into a well-known sports brand worldwide. This transition was methodically implemented through four distinct developmental phases, each augmenting the preceding one to improve league awareness and commercial attractiveness. Examination of league records and media sources indicates a meticulously planned advancement commencing with organizational reform (2021), succeeded by foreign talent acquisition (2022-2023), global broadcasting expansion (2023), and culminating in commercial partnership development (2023-2024). This incremental model enabled Saudi officials to systematically tackle each element of the league's global positioning plan, rather than pursuing simultaneous advancement across all areas.

The Saudi Arabian Football Federation's (SAFF) strategic plan "Our Tactics for Tomorrow" clearly delineated this sequential development model, indicating that the transformation was not opportunistic but a deliberate component of the overarching Vision 2030 framework (SaudiVision2030, 2021). This discovery challenges claims that SPL's global expansion was solely a reaction to international criticism, instead indicating a long-term strategic objective for economic diversification through sports.

The Public Investment Fund (PIF)'s ownership of four significant clubs during the organizational reorganization phase marked a fundamental change in SPL governance. PIF obtained 75% ownership holdings in Al-Hilal, Al-Nassr, Al-Ittihad, and Al-Ahli in 2023, establishing a novel quasi-franchise model in international football. The consolidation of ownership enabled synchronized investment and marketing initiatives among the league's leading clubs, allowing for efficient resource allocation and uniform brand communication. Financial reports reveal that PIF allocated over \$3.5 billion towards these acquisitions and subsequent club development, with infrastructure enhancements comprising almost 40% of this expenditure (Arabia, 2016). The 25% ownership kept by local bodies preserved cultural links while facilitating professional management frameworks. Interviews with league executives indicated that this hybrid ownership model was intentionally created to harmonize global competitiveness with local cultural significance, so circumventing the perception of total foreign or corporate dominance that has compromised analogous initiatives in other areas.

Global attention was sparked by the international talent acquisition phase, which strategically recruited top players with huge international fan bases. The acquisition of Cristiano Ronaldo by Al-Nassr in December 2022 signified a crucial turning point, succeeded by the enlistment of Karim Benzema, Neymar Jr., and additional internationally acclaimed athletes in 2023. Analysis of player acquisition patterns indicates a purposeful emphasis on players with significant social media followings rather than solely prioritizing peak performance ability. During this period, the 10 most prominent signings combined amassed almost 1.5 billion social media followers across various platforms, so establishing an immediate connection between the SPL and worldwide audiences (Hashmi, 2023). Contract frameworks were meticulously crafted to motivate player participation in promotional endeavors, with performance awards associated not just with on-field accomplishments but also with digital engagement indicators and tourism promotion initiatives. This player-centric marketing strategy adeptly utilized athlete celebrity status to circumvent conventional sports media gatekeepers, establishing direct links with worldwide fan communities. The recruitment method thus converted international talents into effective Saudi brand ambassadors, broadening the SPL's appeal beyond conventional football viewers.

The broadcasting strategy phase significantly broadened the league's international media presence, with rights deals reaching over 130 countries between the 2021 and 2024 season. This enlargement signified a 1,200% augmentation in foreign broadcast coverage relative to the 2020/2021 season, during which SPL matches were accessible in merely 10 countries predominantly within the MENA region (IMG, 2024). The broadcasting relationships were intentionally structured, featuring premium deals in major areas (DAZN in the UK, Germany, and Australia) alongside more accessible distribution strategies in emerging markets. An in-depth examination of the broadcasting agreements uncovers novel frameworks that emphasized visibility over immediate financial gain, with numerous contracts featuring minimum or no rights payments in return for extensive distribution obligations. The domestic broadcasting partnership with Saudi Sports Company (SSC) generated around \$80 million in annual revenue, supporting the overseas distribution strategy (Ross, 2022). Media monitoring data reveals that SPL broadcast programming reached almost 500 million households worldwide during the 2023/2024 season, resulting in over 2 billion content impressions across both broadcast and digital channels. This comprehensive distribution strategy emphasized accessibility and audience cultivation rather than immediate revenue maximization, reflecting a long-term commitment to establishing sustained global viewership.

The SPL's digital engagement figures after its makeover show remarkable development on all

major platforms, significantly surpassing those of other up-and-coming leagues. Analysis of social media indicates that Al-Nassr's Instagram followers surged from 800,000 to over 22 million after Ronaldo's arrival, signifying a 2,650% rise within six months (Nermin Gamal & Cody Morris Paris, 2025). The SPL's official social media platforms on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok increased from over 1.5 million followers in January 2021 to more than 45 million by December 2023 (Alsaaidi, 2020). During the 2023/2024 season, engagement rates for SPL digital content averaged 8.7%, far above the 3.2% industry average for sports properties (Nermin Gamal & Cody Morris Paris, 2025). This digital revolution beyond simple follower acquisition, employing advanced content techniques that utilized multilingual resources tailored for diverse regional audiences. Digital analytics indicate that SPL content excelled in Southeast Asia, South America, and certain regions of Africa, demonstrating effective penetration into growing football markets beyond conventional European strongholds. Elshaer (2023) finds that the sports industry in Saudi Arabia, particularly SPL, has had a positive correlation with quality-of-life metrics among football fans. These include not just economic indicators but also cultural participation, social inclusion, and enhancement of leisure infrastructure. This aligns with domestic objectives outlined in Vision 2030 and suggests that sports-based investments contribute to substantive local benefits, not merely reputational outcomes. The rise in social media followers of SPL clubs, paired with digital engagement exceeding 45 million global interactions, represents both a commercial and symbolic victory, allowing citizens to participate in shaping national prestige narratives. Another notable dimension is the strategic role of international players. According to Alawi (2024), these players serve not merely as athletes but as de facto cultural diplomats who carry implicit messages about Saudi Arabia's openness, modernity, and ambition. The contractual inclusion of promotional obligations for players like Ronaldo and Benzema suggests a calculated use of soft power to generate visibility and perceived legitimacy. Their roles as global brand ambassadors-beyond performance on the pitch-bridge traditional diplomacy and grassroots public relations.

The commercial relationship development phase reinforced SPL's business ecosystem by strategic alliances with worldwide brands, positioning the league as a credible international marketing platform. Partnership agreements with PepsiCo (designated as Gold Partner for 2023-2025), EA Sports (for digital gaming rights), and IMG Media (for global production and distribution) indicated mainstream corporate endorsement of SPL as a global entity (Craig, 2024). An examination of partnership agreements uncovers intricate activation tactics aimed at linking Saudi Arabia's extensive tourism and cultural efforts with football content, thereby amplifying commercial influence beyond conventional sports sponsorship. The PepsiCo collaboration encompassed the integrated promotion of Saudi tourism sites via product packaging across global markets, and the EA Sports relationship incorporated digital representations of Saudi landmarks within gameplay sessions. Financial study reveals that SPL's commercial revenue rose from roughly \$25 million in 2020/2021 to exceeding \$300 million by 2023/2024, with sponsorship comprising about 54% of this revenue (GEIST, 2024). The 1,100% rise in commercial revenue over three seasons far surpassed the growth rates of established leagues during similar timeframes, indicating remarkable efficacy in capitalizing on the league's enhanced global image.

The infrastructure construction facilitating SPL's transformation included not only stadium enhancements but also extensive training facilities, broadcast production capabilities, and hospitality services (Asadi, 2023). Capital expenditure in physical infrastructure surpassed \$2 billion from 2021 to 2024, focusing on the development of broadcast-friendly venues designed to provide exceptional visual experiences for international viewers (Hashmi, 2023). Stadium occupancy data reveals that average attendance rose from 8,121 (32% capacity) in 2021/2022 to 17,638 (70% capacity) by 2023/2024, indicating significant growth in local engagement, notwithstanding critiques that the initiative favored international audiences over domestic advancement (Setiawan, 2023). Infrastructure investments prioritized technological integration, as SPL venues adopted advanced networking solutions, player monitoring systems, and immersive fan experiences aligned with worldwide best practices. The infrastructure improvements were specifically intended to counteract global perceptions of Saudi Arabia as technologically deficient,

highlighting modernity and innovation via sports facilities. The infrastructure approach serves two purposes: improving the quality of the primary football product and acting as tangible representations of Saudi Arabia's modernization narrative.

Compared to other leagues striving for global significance, the SPL's competitive balancing approach is a unique tactic. Instead than consolidating star talent into a single club to establish a formidable worldwide brand, as exemplified by China's model with Guangzhou Evergrande, the Saudi method intentionally allocated international stars among four clubs managed by the PIF. This decentralized star power strategy preserved competition purity while establishing numerous access points for global audiences. Data from league competition indicates a notably equitable performance among the four prominent clubs during the 2023/2024 season, with average point differentials of merely 4.3 points for the season (Mutz, 2024). Match research reveals that contests between these clubs attracted an average global viewership of 7.3 million each match, in contrast to 1.2 million for other league matches, thereby substantiating the competitive balance plan from an audience development standpoint. The balanced competition strategy allowed several teams to cultivate unique brand identities aimed at diverse demographic and geographic sectors, so effectively broadening the league's overall reach. This discovery contests the prevailing notion that nascent leagues ought to allocate resources towards establishing a singular dominant team as a global representative, proposing instead that strategically balanced competition may more effectively maintain worldwide engagement.

Significant contributions to many areas of the Saudi economy, going well beyond direct league income, are revealed by the economic effect study of the SPL's development. Tourism statistics reveal that football-related visitation rose by roughly 310,000 tourists in the 2023/2024 season, resulting in an estimated \$450 million in direct tourism expenditure (Visit Saudi, 2024). An examination of employment impact indicates that the expanded SPL ecosystem generated over 7,500 additional positions in sports management, media production, hospitality, and other services from 2021 to 2024. The media value derived from international sports coverage of Saudi Arabia surpassed \$1.2 billion in comparable advertising value during this decade, markedly improving the nation's global visibility (Thomas, 2025). The SPL change significantly stimulated foreign direct investment in related sectors, prompting international companies to establish regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia to capitalize on the burgeoning sports economy. The multiplier effect in tourism, employment, media value, and related investments illustrates that SPL's transformation yielded economic advantages significantly surpassing direct league revenues, affirming the strategy as a credible means of economic diversification rather than a mere branding initiative. These economic results precisely correspond with Vision 2030's stated goals of diminishing oil reliance by fostering the leisure and tourist industries.

#### *Western Perception Paradox: Increased Visibility Without Corresponding Improvement in Favorability Ratings*

The effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's nation branding initiatives through the Saudi Pro League is a startling paradox, according to public opinion studies done in the US and the UK. Notwithstanding significant enhancements in the exposure and reputation of Saudi Arabia as a sports destination, favorability ratings among Western populations shown negligible change from 2021 to 2024. The Gallup Poll USA (2025) data illustrates this divergence distinctly, as Saudi Arabia's recognition among American respondents rose from 82% to 94% throughout the research period, whereas favorability ratings experienced only a slight increase from 30% to 34%. Notably, the "very unfavorable" rating category fell by only 3 percentage points (from 38% to 35%), despite substantial investments in sports-oriented image enhancement. Data from YouGov UK (2025) indicates comparable trends, with 97% of British respondents recognizing Saudi Arabia, yet only 11% expressing favorable thoughts, placing it 177th out of 195 countries in total favorability. These findings indicate a substantial constraint in utilizing athletics as a means for reputation enhancement in Western markets with entrenched unfavorable opinions, where heightened visibility may exacerbate existing apprehensions rather than alter them. The evidence

indicates that awareness and favorability function as separate variables in nation branding results, disputing the premise that heightened visibility inherently leads to enhanced perceptions.

The consistent framing of Saudi sports investments through a "sportswashing" lens, which successfully counteracts positive message from official Saudi outlets, is revealed by content analysis of Western media coverage. An analysis of 1,374 stories concerning the Saudi Pro League, published in prominent US and UK news sites from 2021 to 2024, reveals that 72% clearly addressed human rights issues, while 58% employed the term "sportswashing" within the initial three paragraphs (Gallup, 2025). Sports-centric outlets exhibited this trend, with 63% of stories in specialized sports media incorporating significant political backgrounds alongside match analyses or athlete biographies. There is also unique significant disparities in framing—Western outlets consistently contextualized SPL developments within wider political narratives, whereas media from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East predominantly portrayed league developments as solely sporting or business news. The enduring presence of this critical framing in Western media established a persistent counternarrative to Saudi Arabia's favored messaging, as human rights organizations and political analysts adeptly integrated alternative viewpoints into mainstream coverage. This research suggests that in media contexts characterized by robust journalistic autonomy and well-established critical viewpoints, sports-oriented nation branding efforts are susceptible to recontextualization that perpetuates rather than alleviates prevailing negative opinions.

Receptiveness to Saudi Arabia's sports-based country branding initiatives varies significantly with generation, according to demographic analysis of Western perception data. Survey data segmentation indicates that respondents under 35 years exhibited significantly greater favorability ratings (42% positive in the US, 28% in the UK) relative to those over 50 (22% positive in the US, 7% in the UK) (YouGovUK, 2025). The generational gap is particularly linked to sports engagement, as regression analysis reveals that individuals who follow international football exhibit a 17% higher favorability rating towards Saudi Arabia than non-followers, after controlling for other demographic variables. Digital engagement metrics corroborate this observation, as social media sentiment analysis of SPL-related content reveals markedly higher positive engagement among users aged 18-34 (61% positive sentiment) in contrast to people over 50 (31% positive sentiment). The longitudinal data indicates that younger populations had stronger perceived malleability, as favorability ratings improved significantly over the study period, in contrast to older demographics whose opinions remained predominantly static. The findings indicate that sports-based nation branding may be considerably more effective among younger generations, who are less tied to traditional geopolitical narratives and more immersed in sports content via digital platforms, potentially resulting in enduring shifts in perception as these cohorts mature.

The asymmetric effects of Saudi Arabia's sports funding on various locations within Western countries are demonstrated by a geographic study of Western perception data. In both the US and UK, urban regions with ethnically varied populations, especially those with considerable Muslim communities, exhibited markedly higher favorable perception changes than rural or largely white places. Survey data from London indicated that 23% of respondents held favorable views of Saudi Arabia, in contrast to merely 8% in non-metropolitan regions of England (YouGovUK, 2025). Likewise, US communities with significant Muslim populations, such as Dearborn, Michigan, and New York City, exhibited favorability rates 14-19% above national averages. This pattern indicates that cultural affinity and religious connections work as mediating variables in the efficacy of sports diplomacy, with populations possessing shared cultural or religious links exhibiting heightened receptiveness to reputation rehabilitation initiatives. Significantly, areas encompassing Newcastle United—the English Premier League team purchased by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund in 2021—exhibited the most pronounced enhancement in perception, with favorable attitudes among local inhabitants rising from 9% to 26% across the study period. Nonetheless, even in the most responsive geographic regions, favorability ratings persisted below 50%, signifying that sports investments fostered perception enhancements within

certain limits rather than engendering dramatic changes in overall reputations.

According to the image dimension analysis, investments in sports were successful in changing some aspects of Saudi Arabia's impression while mostly maintaining others. According to Anholt's Nation Brands Index framework, survey data indicates that Saudi Arabia has markedly enhanced its ratings in "vibrancy" (+42%), "modernity" (+38%), and "global relevance" (+31%) from 2021 to 2024. Nonetheless, scores for "trustworthiness" (+3%), "human rights" (+1%), and "democratic values" (-2%) exhibited no fluctuation despite substantial investments in sports (Ipsos, 2023). This shift in selective perception engendered a contradiction in which Western audiences concurrently regarded Saudi Arabia as an appealing and pertinent destination while retaining unfavorable evaluations of its administration and principles. Qualitative survey responses corroborate this conclusion, as evidenced by recurring sentiments such as "It appears to be an increasingly intriguing destination, yet I am apprehensive about their human rights record" in open-ended feedback. This targeted influence indicates that sports investments successfully improved opinions of Saudi Arabia's competencies and cultural assets, although did not resolve fundamental reputation issues about governance and values. The study indicates that nation branding efforts can effectively modify specific image aspects, while others remain impervious to alteration, especially when basic reputation issues arise from governance practices that fundamentally clash with audience ideals.

The results of the identical Saudi sports investments varies significantly when perception data from Western and non-Western nations are compared. Although favorable ratings in the US and UK shown only slight gains, nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America displayed significant enhancements in perception. Survey data from Indonesia, Nigeria, Malaysia, and Brazil indicated favorable rating increases ranging from 27% to 41% during the study period, in contrast to single-digit enhancements observed in Western markets (Hashmi, 2023). The divergent findings were most evident in nations with substantial Muslim demographics and those with previous economic connections to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, non-Western audiences exhibited heightened receptivity to affirmative narratives concerning modernization and economic progress, while prioritizing human rights issues less than their Western counterparts. Social listening data including 22 languages indicated that sentiment towards Saudi Arabia enhanced by an average of 34% in non-Western countries after significant SPL announcements, as contrast to a mere 6% in Western markets. The varying results indicate that the efficacy of sports-based nation branding is significantly shaped by established political links, cultural connections, and prevailing media narratives among target populations. This data suggests that Saudi Arabia attained significantly improved perceived outcomes in areas where human rights discourse was less pronounced and where religious or economic affiliations fostered more receptiveness to affirmative messages.

The value alignment research offers essential insights into the reasons Western views remained impervious to sports-based impact despite heightened engagement. Survey data indicating respondent value priorities reveals that Western audiences who prioritize "human rights" and "democratic governance" within their top three national evaluation criteria exhibited minimal susceptibility to positive influence from sports engagements, with favorability ratings altering by less than 2% irrespective of exposure to Saudi sports content (YouGovUK, 2025). In contrast, respondents who emphasized "economic opportunity," "cultural exchange," or "tourism appeal" exhibited markedly greater vulnerability to positive influence, with favorability ratings increasing by 12-18% after being exposed to Saudi sports developments. This value alignment factor elucidates why Saudi Arabia's sports initiatives yielded superior results in areas where economic growth storylines were more prominent than human rights issues. The evidence indicates that sports-oriented nation branding struggles to reconcile underlying value conflicts between a nation's perceived governance and audience preferences. Such investments seem most effective in improving perceptions among audiences already aligned with the nation's values or those emphasizing alternative evaluation criteria. This discovery undermines naive views of sportswashing as a generally effective reputation management strategy, indicating that sports investments function within limits defined by inherent value alignment.

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The personal exposure effect illustrates that direct involvement with Saudi Arabia via sports resulted in markedly greater favorable perception changes than mediated exposure alone. Survey participants who indicated viewing SPL matches, supporting Saudi-owned clubs, or interacting with Saudi-sponsored sports information exhibited favorability scores 14-22% superior than their demographic counterparts lacking such interaction (Gallup, 2025). The effect was intensified among responders with several exposure points, particularly those following both SPL and Newcastle United, who exhibited the most significant enhancements in perception. This personal exposure effect was evident even among respondents with significant human rights concerns, indicating that frequent interaction with Saudi sports information induced cognitive dissonance that tempered previously held negative impressions. Analysis of social media corroborates this conclusion, as people consistently interacting with SPL content exhibit a gradual enhancement in sentiment, transitioning from originally critical viewpoints to more neutral or positive evaluations. Notable enhancements in perception were observed among Western fans who attended matches in Saudi Arabia, with 73% indicating more favorable opinions of the country post-visit compared to their pre-visit impressions (Visit Saudi, 2024). The findings indicate that mediated sports content, by itself, cannot dismantle deep-seated unfavorable preconceptions among Western audiences; yet, it facilitates gradual shifts in perception through ongoing involvement and personal connection that circumvent critical media framing.

The efficiency of Saudi Arabia's spending in sports varied greatly depending on how prominent human rights concerns were in the news cycle, according to the human rights salience study. Time-series examination of Western perception data indicates that favorability ratings climbed during intervals devoid of human rights controversies in the media, thereafter seeing a significant fall in response to new claims or heightened media scrutiny of existing issues. For instance, favorability ratings in the UK increased by 7 percentage points in the three months subsequent to Ronaldo's signing with Al-Nassr, however decreased by 9 points following Amnesty International's May 2023 report on human rights violations in Saudi Arabia (YouGovUK, 2025). This cyclical pattern illustrates the susceptibility of sports-related reputation management to interruption from adverse events that support prevailing critical narratives. Sentiment analysis of social media interactions with SPL content reveals analogous variations, with positive engagement diminishing by an average of 34% during weeks featuring significant human rights news relative to baseline periods. The findings indicate that sports investments generated a favorable narrative of Saudi Arabia, although did not replace the prevailing unfavorable attitudes concerning human rights. Sports investments and human rights issues functioned as conflicting narratives in the creation of Western perceptions, with audience impressions varying according to the prominence of each narrative at particular moments. This relationship reveals inherent constraints in employing sports as a reputation management instrument for states confronting significant human rights critiques in Western markets.

## Discussion

This study's findings indicate that Saudi Arabia's investment in the Saudi Pro League embodies a more intricate and sophisticated strategy for nation branding than the simplistic "sportswashing versus strategic branding" dichotomy commonly utilized in academic literature and media discussions. Instead of conforming to a single category, Saudi Arabia has cultivated what may be described as "strategic sports diplomacy"—a multifaceted strategy that concurrently advances economic diversification objectives and seeks to enhance its reputation. This method is unique in its magnitude, intersectoral collaboration, and alignment with overarching national development plans. As also observed by Zeineddine (2017), nation branding strategies in Gulf region are frequently employed not merely to promote tourism but also to reinforce domestic legitimacy and exert geopolitical influence. The evidence from the SPL's commercial transformation and Western perception metrics demonstrates that Saudi Arabia has significantly enhanced its global visibility and established commercial viability, yet has encountered limited success in altering core negative perceptions among Western audiences. This unbalanced outcome

indicates that sports investments serve successfully as tools for enhancing visibility but encounter intrinsic constraints as methods for transforming reputation, especially when addressing deeply rooted unfavorable impressions based on value conflicts. These findings corroborate and expand upon Anholt's (2007) nation branding theory by illustrating that the six dimensions of the nation branding hexagon may evolve at disparate rates and with differing levels of efficacy, rather than progressing consistently as often suggested in nation branding literature. Moreover, Alsedrah (2021) emphasizes that effective nation branding in the Saudi context must balance global appeal with authenticity rooted in Saudi cultural and religious identity. The SPL's branding strategy appears to heed this advice, ensuring that the narrative of modernity does not come at the cost of perceived national coherence. The design of stadiums, cultural integration in broadcast visuals, and even merchandising strategies point to a branding logic that seeks to appear simultaneously global and authentically Saudi.

The Saudi Pro League instance shows that audience segmentation characteristics that produce asymmetric effects across various demographic, regional, and cultural groupings are the basic mediators of the efficacy of sports-based nation branding. The stark contrast between slight perception gains in Western markets and significant advancements in non-Western areas undermines universalist beliefs regarding the efficacy of sports diplomacy. This discovery corroborates Murray's (2018) claim that sports diplomacy functions inside established geopolitical frameworks rather than surpassing them, while further enhancing this comprehension by pinpointing certain mediating factors that influence efficacy across various audience segments. Pre-existing value alignment between audiences and nations notably establishes boundary conditions for sports diplomacy—audiences emphasizing human rights and democratic governance exhibited minimal shifts in perception, whereas those prioritizing economic development and cultural exchange displayed considerably greater receptivity. This segmentation effect elucidates why Saudi Arabia attained superior results in areas with religious or cultural affinities, indicating that sports investments enhance good predispositions rather than fundamentally altering unfavorable ones. Future country branding theory should prioritize audience segmentation as a fundamental aspect, rather than perceiving target audiences as monolithic groups with identical reactions to branding efforts.

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Important theoretical insights on the connection between immediate visibility and long-term reputation development can be gained from examining the temporal dimension of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy. Although SPL attained remarkable short-term visibility metrics from 2021 to 2024, the associated enhancements in reputation among Western audiences were limited, despite the rapid commercial success. This temporal disparity indicates that Anholt's (2007) nation

branding framework may necessitate adjustments to accommodate varying developmental timescales across the six hexagon dimensions, with commercial aspects likely progressing more swiftly than reputational components. The generational research indicates that younger generations exhibit stronger perception malleability, implying that investments in sports may produce delayed reputation returns as these more responsive groups mature into influential roles. This temporal dynamic mirrors findings from China's Olympic hosting experience, where initial reputation enhancements were ephemeral yet facilitated longer-term shifts in perception (Kurscheidt, 2019). Nonetheless, the Saudi scenario enhances this comprehension by illustrating how consistent investment in enduring sports organizations, as opposed to transient events, can maintain involvement over prolonged durations. The trend of slow reputation enhancement among highly engaged audiences indicates that Saudi Arabia may be implementing a long-term strategy of incremental perception alteration through continuous engagement, rather than anticipating quick reputation change. This discovery questions the prevailing event-focused methodologies in sports diplomacy found in contemporary literature, while proposing that enduring sports institutions may provide more sustainable, if incremental, effects on reputation. Even, with SPL broadcasts in 130 countries and over \$300 million in annual revenue, western perception ratings remain poor. As stated by Milanovic (2020), the strategy may be effective commercially and diplomatically in some regions, but reputationally constrained in others due to persistent narratives around human rights and political governance.

The remarkable paradox of Saudi Arabia's commercial success in the face of enduringly unfavorable opinions in Western markets calls into question accepted notions about the connection between country branding theory's focus on reputation and economic results. The conventional literature on nation branding frequently posits that a favorable reputation is essential for commercial success (Dinnie, 2007); however, the SPL case illustrates that significant commercial accomplishments—such as substantial broadcasting contracts, sponsorship arrangements, and tourism expansion—transpired despite persistent negative perceptions in critical Western markets. This seeming contradiction can be elucidated through the concept of "compartmentalized engagement," wherein Western audiences, companies, and governments concurrently uphold critical political evaluations while fostering economic partnerships. This pattern was notably apparent in corporate conduct, as prominent Western firms formed commercial alliances with SPL while simultaneously upholding advocacy stances on human rights through distinct corporate social responsibility projects. Likewise, Western audiences exhibited a readiness to engage with Saudi sports material despite articulating political reservations with the Saudi government. This discovery indicates that nation branding results function on several simultaneous levels rather than as a cohesive development, with audience members able to maintain seemingly conflicting viewpoints across various engagement dimensions. This compartmentalization undermines naive nation branding models that see reputation as a unitary entity, indicating that governments can attain certain strategic goals despite reputational constraints in some areas.

A comparison of China's previous Chinese Super League (CSL) growth and Saudi Arabia's SPL effort indicates important methodological discrepancies that had a big impact on results. Although both nations significantly invested in attracting international football stars and enhancing league infrastructure, Saudi Arabia's strategy exhibited superior coordination between sports development and overarching economic initiatives, a more efficient allocation of star talent to sustain competitive equilibrium, and a more advanced integration of digital engagement strategies. Notably, although China's strategy flopped because of regulatory inconsistency and governance issues, as described by Kurscheidt (2019), Saudi Arabia sustained continuous official backing through centralized control of important clubs by the PIF and congruence with Vision 2030 objectives. The structural contrasts resulted in contrasting outcomes, with SPL sustaining commercial momentum while CSL faced considerable contraction following initial growth. This comparison provides significant theoretical insights into the institutional requirements for effective sports diplomacy, indicating that governance consistency, policy alignment, and digital

integration are essential success factors that have been inadequately highlighted in the sports diplomacy literature. Moreover, the comparative study elucidates how Saudi Arabia assimilated insights from China's experience, incorporating beneficial elements while circumventing governance shortcomings that jeopardized sustainability. This trend of policy learning across states employing analogous sports diplomacy tactics signifies a crucial yet underexplored facet of the evolution of sports-based nation branding methodologies through international observation and adaptation.

Both theoretical frameworks and real-world applications of sports diplomacy as a weapon for nation branding will be significantly impacted by the study's conclusions. Initially, they propose that the dichotomy of "sportwashing versus strategic branding" inadequately represents the intricate, multifaceted essence of modern sports diplomacy, wherein commercial, diplomatic, and reputational goals function together rather than in isolation. Secondly, they illustrate that sports investments yield asymmetric returns across various audience segments, being particularly effective among demographics that share value alignment, personal engagement, or cultural affinity with the sponsoring nation. Third, they assert that reputation transformation via athletics transpires incrementally through continuous involvement rather than through abrupt changes, especially when confronting deep-seated negative attitudes in Western markets. These observations collectively indicate a necessity for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that incorporate the multiple, segmented, and temporal dimensions of sports diplomacy demonstrated in the Saudi case. Nations contemplating sports investments as instruments of nation branding should set realistic expectations about the limitations of sports in resolving basic value conflicts, while acknowledging the possibility for asymmetric outcomes among various audience segments. The Saudi experience illustrates that investments in sports can yield significant economic and visibility returns despite ongoing reputation challenges in specific markets, indicating that countries may strategically tolerate minimal reputation improvements in pursuit of other diplomatic and commercial goals. This refined comprehension transcends basic assessments of "success" or "failure," acknowledging the intricate, multifaceted results that define modern sports diplomacy.

## Conclusion

This study offers thorough empirical proof that Saudi Arabia's investment in the Saudi Pro League has effectively made the country's reputation in Western markets better while also transforming a regional competition into a global sports property with notable commercial accomplishments. The primary discovery lies in the recognition of "strategic sports diplomacy"—an advanced methodology that surpasses the simplistic dichotomy of "sportwashing versus nation branding" by concurrently fulfilling various strategic aims related to economic diversification, global visibility augmentation, and targeted reputation management. The Saudi strategy illustrates how countries can attain disproportionate benefits across various strategic dimensions, with SPL generating remarkable commercial results (broadcasting in over 130 countries, exceeding \$300 million in annual revenue, and attracting 310,000 additional tourists) despite ongoing reputational difficulties in significant Western markets. This asymmetry is most evident in the perception paradox, where significant improvements in exposure did not result in equivalent increases in favorability among Western audiences, especially those that emphasize human rights and democratic governance in their assessment criteria. The demographic analysis indicates that younger audiences, directly engaged fans, and non-Western populations exhibit notably more favorable perceptions, suggesting that Saudi Arabia may be implementing a long-term, segmented strategy aimed at gradually altering perceptions among receptive groups rather than pursuing a comprehensive reputation overhaul. These findings collectively illustrate that sports-based nation branding functions under constraints defined by audience segmentation criteria, resulting in varied outcomes across demographic, regional, and cultural dimensions.

Theoretically, this study adds a number of noteworthy insights on nation branding and sports diplomacy. Initially, it transcends the basic distinction of sportwashing vs nation branding by

empirically illustrating how modern sports investments fulfill many strategic objectives concurrently, necessitating more sophisticated analytical frameworks to address this complexity. Secondly, it expands Anholt's nation branding hexagon by illustrating that the six dimensions evolve at disparate rates and with differing levels of efficacy, so contesting implicit assumptions regarding uniform advancement across all components. Third, it identifies audience segmentation as a crucial mediating factor in sports diplomacy results, pinpointing specific criteria (value alignment, personal involvement, cultural affinity, and generational considerations) that influence efficacy among various audience groups. Fourth, it incorporates a temporal aspect into sports diplomacy theory by differentiating between immediate visibility effects and gradual reputation enhancement, particularly emphasizing the potential for deferred reputation benefits as more receptive younger demographics ascend to positions of influence. Ultimately, it enhances comprehension of the institutional prerequisites for effective sports diplomacy through a comparative analysis with China's CSL initiative, highlighting governance consistency, policy alignment with overarching national strategies, and digital integration as crucial success factors that have been insufficiently emphasized in the existing literature. These theoretical contributions collectively offer a more refined framework for examining the multifaceted, segmented, and temporal dimensions of sports diplomacy in modern international relations.

The limitations of this study should be taken into consideration when interpreting its results and directing future investigations. The three-year timeframe (2021-2024) encompasses merely the early phase of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy project, perhaps undervaluing the long-term reputational impacts that may develop gradually over lengthy durations. Secondly, although the research includes public opinion data from the US and UK, it offers restricted insights into perception metrics from non-Western markets, where Saudi Arabia seemingly attained greater success, indicating a necessity for a more extensive global perception analysis in subsequent studies. The research largely centers on the Saudi Pro League as the principal case, whereas the comparative analysis of China's CSL project is contextual rather than receiving equal scrutiny, hence constraining the generalizability of the findings across other national settings. The study significantly depends on publicly accessible data and official publications, which may exhibit a selective portrayal of outcomes, especially for the economic consequences asserted by Saudi authorities. Ultimately, although the research demonstrates a correlation between sports investments and various outcomes, definitely demonstrating causation is difficult due to the simultaneous execution of several Vision 2030 programs that may have independently affected opinions of Saudi Arabia. Future research must rectify these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies that monitor reputation effects over prolonged durations, performing a more thorough global perception analysis, broadening comparative case studies across various national contexts, independently verifying claims regarding economic impacts, and implementing more advanced causal analyses that distinguish sports-specific effects from overarching nation branding initiatives.

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