



Clashes of cultures at the FIFA World Cup: Reflections on soft power, nation building, and sportswashing in Qatar 2022

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Revised: 6 July 2023 / Accepted: 19 July 2023 / Published online: 4 August 2023
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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss clashing narratives around the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup through the lenses of nation branding, public diplomacy, and country image. Beyond the athletic competition, Qatar 2022 was also a cultural clash between East and West, or the Global North and the Global South as it was the first time such a significant mega-event was held in the Arab and Muslim world. While western countries and media framed the event as a sportswashing attempt by Qatar to distract from the death toll of migrant workers, corruption, discriminative policies against the LGBTQ community, and environmental damage, the Qataris positioned the competition as part of a long-term nation building strategy, while counter-criticizing using whataboutism and even through accusations of orientalism and Islamophobia. This case study discusses five areas of dualities in which nation branding and related fields manifested through Qatar 2022: (a) Clashes of civilizations and colonial imperialism, (b) Sportswashing, soft Power, and nation building, (c) Nationalism in a globalized world, (d) Everyone can engage in cultural diplomacy, and (e) Sustainability, inclusion, and greenwashing. The study is significant as it contributes to existing literature nuanced, critical, and at times self-contradicting discussion on sports, nation branding, and related fields, in the context of globalization and the complexity of Middle East geopolitics.

Keywords Greenwashing · Sports diplomacy · Nation branding · Mega-events · Geopolitics

Introduction

“Today I have very strong feelings, today I feel Qatari, today I feel Arab, today I feel African, today I feel gay, today I feel disabled, today I feel a migrant worker” (Olley 2022). This is how Gianni Infantino, the white, male, millionaire, Swiss president of the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA), opened the press conference the day before the opening game of the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup. Ever since Qatar won the bid to host the competition, back in December 2010, and until after Leo Messi lifted the world cup in 2022, FIFA and the conservative Muslim Gulf country faced international scrutiny about corruption, human rights violations, and sportswashing from western scholars and media (Boykoff and Zirin 2022; Jones 2022; Sky News 2022; The Guardian 2022). “I’m European. I think for what we Europeans have been doing for 3000

years around the world, we should be apologizing for the next 3000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people” (Olley 2022), said the FIFA President blaming the west for hypocrisy and racism against the first Muslim and Arab country to host such a prestigious mega-event. Such approach of countercriticism and accusations of orientalism, cultural relativism, and even racism and Islamophobia, became repeated tactics by the Qataris and their supporters all through the competitions (Ronay 2022a). The Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup was more than an athletic battlefield between 32 national teams or a nation branding opportunity for the countries they represent of using a quadrennial opportunity to capitalize on the exposure for geopolitical reasons. Qatar 2022 was also a cultural clash between East and West, or the Global North and the Global South as it was the first time such a significant mega-event was held in the Arab and Muslim world. With a global outreach of over four billion viewers from around the world, the FIFA World Cup (WC)—the men’s world championship in football¹—is one of the most popular events humanity holds (Chadwick et al. 2022). Football is the most popular sport in the world

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in terms of participation and viewership (Woods and Butler 2021), and the WC is its crown jewel, watched by global audiences of billions. Due to its popularity, small and big, developed and developing, democratic and autocratic, hosting and participating, countries have been trying to use the event and its exposure for nation branding and public diplomacy purposes to improve their image and achieve social, political, and economic goals (Rofe 2022).

Qatar is a small Muslim country in the Arab Gulf, rich with national resources and especially gas, with around 300,000 citizens and three million residents, 90% of whom are migrant workers. Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council,² has strong ties with Iran and financially supports terror organizations, but also hosts a U.S. Air Force base (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Tifo Football 2022). The WC was awarded to Qatar under clouds of corruption allegations (Griffin 2019), and was moved from the summer of 2022 to November/December due to the heat in the country (DiMauro and Pehme 2021). Qatar especially was scrutinized for human rights violations, especially in relation to the deaths and living conditions of migrant workers who were employed in Qatar under the kafala³ system in sub-human conditions (Griffin 2019; Holmes 2022; Sky News 2022; Tifo Football 2022). Due to the criticism, the Qataris abolished that system, but the number of deaths related to the WC remain controversial, ranging from thousands to hundreds, a few dozens, or only three—depending on the source (DiMauro and Pehme 2021; Ingle 2022). Being a Muslim country, homosexuality is against the Qatari laws, women's rights are limited, and alcohol is restricted. According to Brannagan and Reiche (2022) (2022, since winning the bid to host the 2022 FIFA WC, international criticism of Qatar focused on three key areas: (a) Qatar's human rights records, (b) accusations of bribery and corruption, and (c) Qatar as a sport event destination. The purpose of this case study is to explore and discuss the clashing narratives around the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup through the lenses of nation branding, public diplomacy, and country image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015; Fan 2010).

The article follows the structure of two articles previously published in *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy* by Cull (2010) and Dubinsky (2022a, b), and uses them to foster the discussion. Cull (2010) reflected on the role of public diplomacy, suggesting seven lessons for its future from its past: (1) public diplomacy begins with listening,

(2) public diplomacy must be connected to policy, (3) public diplomacy is not a performance for domestic consumption, (4) effective public diplomacy requires credibility, but this has implications for the bureaucratic structure around the activity, (5) sometimes the most credible voice in public diplomacy is not one's own, (6) public diplomacy is not always about you, and (7) public diplomacy is everyone's business. Dubinsky (2022a, b) discussed the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, sharing ten reflections on nation branding and public diplomacy about the following issues: (1) The Olympic Movement is entering a new era, (2) questionable legacy, (3) bypassing democracy, (4) athletes-to-people diplomacy is trending, (5) Brand America still an Olympic Superpower, (6) athletic competitions as nation branding battlefields, (7) manifestations of political conflicts, (8) rethinking cultural diplomacy, (9) global challenges, and (10) inevitable backlash. The case study uses Fan's (2010) nation branding model, consisting of lenses from public diplomacy, place branding, product-country-image, and national identity, and Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) four-dimensional country image model constructed of functional, normative, esthetic, and sympathetic dimensions. The article uses media coverage by both Western and non-western outlets, along with academic work, to justify and exemplify arguments. This case study shares reflections on five issues, with each one discussing dualities and at times self-contradicting or opposing implications of Qatar 2022 with nation branding, public diplomacy, and country image implications, expanding multidisciplinary literature on the WC, nation branding, and related fields, and provide insights practitioners and decision makers should consider when holding mega-events.

Clashes of civilizations and colonial imperialism

International sports are transitioning into a new era, and the legacies of mega sports events can be interpreted differently and at times questionable (Dubinsky 2022b). Dubinsky (2022a, b) argued that following the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, and although differently, such dualities apply also to Qatar 2022. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, several American scholars reflected on the meaning of the new world order (Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1996). In his book "The End of History" (Fukuyama 1992), Francis Fukuyama predicts that the Western world, led by the United States (USA) and western European countries will be the dominant force in global affairs. Samuel Huntington (1996) shared such perception regarding the American military superiority and in his book "Clash of Civilizations" predicted that the main challenges to the western and liberal world will be mostly cultural from what he

² The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a collaboration agreement from 1981 between countries in the Arab Gulf, including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, committed to regional growth.

³ The kafala system is a sponsoring and monitoring system of migrant workers, often used in the Arab Gulf, in which in country sponsors control the visa and legal status of the foreign employee.



defined as other civilizations, including the Russians, Chinese, and the Islamic world. The book became historically controversial, for the way the Islamic world was depicted and Huntington's thesis was framed as "highly Eurocentric" (Hobson 2014, p.75).

Such approaches glorifying the superiority of the western world were highly criticized by post-colonialism scholar Edward Said (1993, 2003) criticized the way western countries established their dominance by colonizing other countries, thousands of kilometers away from their homelands. Since the 1970s, Said (2003) used the word "orientalism" to criticize the way western stakeholders portray other cultures as brutal or barbaric, without understanding the nuances of others or reflecting on the harm western colonialism left, and specifically revolts against stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Arabs as hostile and inhuman. Furthermore, Said (1993) argues that through colonial imperialism the west also established its norms on the global order. Perhaps the biggest criticism of Huntington's (1996) "Clash of Civilizations" is the generalization of the Islamic world as a civilization and as a cohesive unit, contributing to the stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Arabs in the context of terror, especially post-9/11. While Said (2003) was writing about orientalism since the 1970s, focusing mostly on western media, authors, and artists, Hussain and Cunningham (2022) argue that even in sports management scholarships there is Eurocentric bias about Muslim communities.

Such lenses have nation branding implications, as on one hand Qatar has been discussed as a country affiliated with terrorism due to tight connections and collaborations with Iran and support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, while on the other hand, the country has framed the 2022 WC as a way to debunk stereotypes about the Middle East and Muslims. Qatar is a small country rich with natural resources, with a population of three million people, of whom only 10% are citizens, geographically located in the Arab Gulf, surrounded by the two conflicting regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran, and within proximity of chaotic Iraq. Qatar, which was under British Governance since 1919, became independent in 1971 (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015), and part of the GCC since the 1980s. Being rich in natural resources, especially gas, makes Qatar a valuable economic partner for countries and international institutions. Instead of investing in military force, Qatar positioned its security through negotiations, establishing relations with both the Saudis and Iran and hosting an American Air Force base. Thus, while there is authenticity in the framing of Qatar as having close ties with Islamic extremist groups, internationally acknowledged terror organizations, and murderous regimes, it also serves as a negotiator between East and West and joined western forces during the first Gulf War and the military based played a role in being an American base in the Middle East even during 2022 as the USA

evacuated from Afghanistan. One of the first activities the US Men's National Team (USMNT) and members of the American broadcasting rights holders FOX did when arriving in Qatar, was to visit the Air Force base and pay respect to the soldiers just after Veterans Day Weekend.

Qatar's relations with Iran and terror organizations sparked criticism from western media, but also countercriticism of "Islamophobia" (Al Jazeera Staff 2022a; Gjerovi 2022). The fact the WC was held for the first time in a Muslim country, sheds light on cultural and religious differences especially related to alcohol, modesty, and gender, especially regarding women's rights and the LGBTQ community as homosexuality is against the law. The connection between sports and religion goes back to the celebrations for Zeus in Ancient Olympia, and even manifested through the history of the WC with a church in Argentina named "Hand of God," celebrating the legacy of Diego Maradona not just winning the world cup but also ripping off England, a western colonizing country, amid the Falkland Wars. Yet, when it came to Qatar and Islam, all these issues were scrutinized by international media, negatively portraying not just the normative dimension of the country for not being inclusive, but also the functional dimension for not being prepared on time to serve alcohol in dedicated zones, and the esthetic dimension of the country through emphasizing anti-LGBTQ legislations and restrictions regarding modesty or showing public affections as part of local traditions. Thus, what international media framed as human rights violations, the counter-reaction was framing the criticism as another manifestation of orientalism. With around 70 countries in the world in which homosexuality is against the law, and with the Arab Gulf becoming a more dominant force in hosting sports events, international media faced self-questioning about how sports could be practiced globally and celebrate the Muslim world, despite discriminative legislation. As Owen Slot wrote in *The Times* (2022) when summarizing the tournament:

It was naive to believe that by bringing the World Cup to Qatar, football was going to somehow turbo-boost societal change. Football will not change religion. Football will not legalize homosexuality in Muslim countries. Yet if sport is to continue returning to the Gulf, as it will do, then conversations need to be had about how we engage. It isn't straightforward.

Qatar 2022 aimed to change stereotypical depictions, positioning itself as the first WC in the Arab and Muslim World, and through that to improve the normative dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) of the host's country image. Despite having different ball-kicking games in different cultures around the world for thousands of years, the sport of football was institutionalized during the second half of the nineteenth century in Great Britain, the sports' international governing body FIFA was established in Switzerland



by European countries, all the world cups in the twentieth century were held either in Europe or the Americas and only European and South American national teams won the tournament or competed in the finals. Thus, for football fans, the norm became Europe and South America. Anything else was a deviation. Only in the third millennium, other continents and countries hosted the event with Japan and Korea doing so in 2002, South Africa in 2010, and Qatar becoming the third one, in 2022. Qatar 2022 was only the second WC that was not held in a country where a European language was the most dominant one. Arab and Muslim countries have bid for hosting the 1994, 1998, 2006, and 2010 FIFA WC, but continuously fell short with the USA, France, Germany, and South Africa chosen, with the latter three being awarded under allegations of corruption in the winning bids. While the USA was not accused of corruption in the 1994 WC bid, the Salt Lake City 2002 Olympic bid became a symbol of corruption, as the Americans bribed International Olympic Committee (IOC) members to vote for the Mormon city (Murray 2019). Thus, Muslim and Arab countries were excluded from hosting mega sports events, as western countries established their hegemony through a corrupted culture.

The first two recommendations Cull (2010) makes are that public diplomacy begins with listening and that public diplomacy must be connected to policy. By abolishing the kafala system following international scrutiny and through investing in western gatekeepers that could identify soft spots in liberal ideologies, Qatar managed to shape public diplomacy messages positioning the country as defiant to the global north and Qatar 2022 as unapologetically Arab and Muslim-oriented. From not caving to western and progressive demands about changing LGBTQ laws, through banning alcohol and going back on agreements in the last moment which made the games more inviting for Muslim fans and fans zones more family friendly, to being endorsed by fans from Arab countries. Qatar 2022 can be seen as a moment of Pan-Arab pride, and defiance against the west, against a history of European colonization and the historic chaos European countries, created in the Middle East, against the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and against Israel and the Zionist Movement. Qatar used sports, not just for soft power purposes, but to ensure its security in a troubled region (Brannagan and Reiche 2022) and position itself as a developed country as part of the long-term plan Qatar National Vision 2030 (Government Communication Office 2022). The 2022 WC was the pinnacle of that effort and was used not just for nation branding but also nation building purposes (Chadwick 2022b) by modernizing infrastructure and international collaborations, trying to position Qatar as a champion for the Arab and Muslim world and at times for the global south.

Critics of Qatar 2022 emphasize unprecedented multi-layers of corruption allegations, including whistleblower's

evidence of over a million dollars promised to FIFA Executive Committee (ExCo) members, offering paid positions and indirect benefits to ExCo members and their families, and might even paying billions of dollars to governments and having heads of states pressuring to ExCo members from their countries to support the Qatari bid (DiMauro and Pehme 2021; Sky News 2022). Perhaps the most common accusation is the involvement of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy who might have influenced former French UEFA President Michel Platini to have the European members of FIFA ExCo support the Qatari bid after the Qatari bought French airbus planes for billions of dollars (DiMauro and Pehme 2021), which ultimately secured FIFA choosing the Qataris. The investigation FIFA conducted did not result with a smoking gun, but with further suspicion of wrongdoing and lack of transparency. American Chuck Blazer, who supported the American bid for the 2022 WC, was one of the most corrupted FIFA ExCo members, before being caught by the FBI and turned informant. His information helped the FBI in collaboration with other law enforcement agencies led to mass arrests and resignations of FIFA members and officials, and almost every member of the ExCo that voted on the 2022 bid was arrested, indicted, or faced corruption allegations (DiMauro and Pehme 2021; The Associated Press 2015). Thus, even the framing of Qatari corruption is also a source of cultural disputes between the East and West about hegemony and corruption. During the competitions in 2022, the vice president of the European Parliament was arrested due to bribes allegations from Qatar (Burke 2022). Accusations the Qataris, of course, deny.

The cultural clash between East and West manifested mostly in the days leading to the competitions, leading to a negative depiction of Qatar. For example, the decision by the Qataris to go back on their agreed decision and to ban alcohol from being sold in the stadiums was criticized not only for the financial impact on sponsors or the enjoyment of fans but on the credibility of the organization and the hosting country. Freedom of speech issues arose when a Danish television crew was told to stop filming, through having flags and banners evaluation areas, to restricting fans, journalists, and even athletes from wearing the rainbow colors in support of the LGBTQ community. International media scrutinized Qatar for paying fans to come to the country or using "fake fans" to orchestrate a celebratory atmosphere (LW 2022), and even a Colombian performer Maluma left an interview with Israeli television following questions about the role of artists performing in a country accused of human rights violations (TMZ 2022). The cultural clashes also manifested through sponsors, and corporate diplomacy, such as Danish sports manufacturing company Hummel designing "protest kits" with faded logos (Associated Press and Reuters 2022) as part of their sponsorship with the Denmark



national team, while Asian sponsors rushed to support Qatar 2022 (Duerden 2022).

One of the most critical journalists about the Supreme Committee of Delivery and Legacy—which is the bombastic name of the organizing committee of Qatar 2022, was American Grant Wahl who was refused to enter a stadium after wearing a t-shirt with the rainbow colors and wrote critical articles against “their apathy over migrant workers deaths” (Wahl 2022). In one of the most tragic moments in WC history, Wahl collapsed and died while covering the quarter-final game between Argentina and the Netherlands. While at first, his brother suggested Wahl was killed after getting death threats, following the autopsy in New York the family released a statement he died from an aortic aneurysm (Madani and Lenthang 2022). The ongoing negative coverage by western media led to further back and forth of countercriticism about hypocrisy and orientalism (Jones 2022) and Wahl’s tragic death became another source of controversy. Wahl, a Qatari journalist, and two migrant workers died in Qatar during the competitions. Thus, since the announcement and until lifting the cup, every step of Qatar 2022 was a clash between cultures and ideologies, at times filled with dualities and opposing messages.

Sportswashing, soft power, and nation building

One common term scholars and media often used to describe Qatar’s use of the 2022 WC was “sportswashing” (Boykoff 2022a, b; Dubinsky 2022b; Sky News 2022). The term sportswashing predominantly describes authoritarian regimes using sports to launder their images from human rights violations (Boykoff 2022a, b; Chadwick 2022a, b). Examples include Il Duce Benito Mussolini using the 1934 WC in host Italy to raise a wave of national pride by threatening referees and securing the domestic win, Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party using the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games to show German people how functional and developed the country is under the Nazi Regime and establish their governance, the 1978 WC held under the murderous military dictatorship in Argentina, and in the twenty-first century China using the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games to showcase its capabilities to establish itself as a global power, and Russia using the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games and 2018 WC for Vladimir Putin’s hawkish geopolitical goals (Brun and Gomez 2022; Boykoff 2022a, b). Yet such classification is somewhat simplistic, as democracies also use sports to justify their questionable past or policies such as the Commonwealth Games were used by the British Empire and then Great Britain to promote its values through existing and former colonies (Boykoff 2022a, b), or American football

including the Super Bowl used to promote the U.S. armed forces or even to galvanize the country around wars (Dubinsky 2022b). Thus, sportswashing is mostly a cultural term to describe a motive that is criticized, and not necessarily the use of sports for nation branding and public diplomacy. Sports is a subset of cultural diplomacy (Dubinsky 2019), which is a subset of soft power (Nye 2004)—an attempt by countries to create a more favorable image through attractions and military force. To a certain extent, almost every country uses sports for such purposes through participation in the Olympic Games and showing their national symbols or having their football teams participate in the qualifications -or-if-successful-in the final tournament of the WC, representing communities of millions and having their national anthem played before every game (Dubinsky 2019). When trying to theorize sportswashing, Boykoff (2022a, b) makes four observations:

(a) the practice is not just the domain of autocrats, but can emerge in democracies as well; (b) domestic audiences are crucial to understanding the political complexities of sportswashing; (c) sportswashing often sets the stage for military intervention; and (d) new forms of sportswashing are emerging, with authoritarian regimes funding teams and events in democratic states. (p. 1).

Qatar does not use sports only for nation branding, public diplomacy, and soft power purposes (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015). According to Brannagan and Reiche (2022), Qatar should be understood through its security anxieties being a small country surrounded by Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and its investment in sports should be understood as part of ongoing global foreign policy goals. Furthermore, The 2022 WC was the crown jewel in the country’s nation building strategy (Chadwick 2022b) The 2022 FIFA WC was the pinnacle of ongoing investments in sports for soft power purposes, ranging from hosting annual competitions, sponsoring football teams across Europe including Qatar Airways being the first commercial sponsor of FC Barcelona, owning Paris Saint Germain (PSG), naturalizing athletes to represent Qatar on the world stage, and paying athletes to advocate for the country and the world cup. Furthermore, to prepare for the world cup, the country invested in infrastructure, building not just new stadiums, but also roads, hotels, and a transportation system. This gave the Qataris and their supporters a justification to argue that the unprecedented cost of over 200 billion dollars, which was higher than all previous FIFA WCs combined, was not just for a sports competition, but for infrastructure that will serve the country’s future. Yet, this approach also strengthened the critics’ arguments that deals made by the Qatari Royal Family and foreign governments and organizations were indirect bribes to secure the hosting of the WC. By emphasizing the nation building significance beyond just the tournament, the discussion on the exact number of migrant workers



who died in the preparations for the tournament building infrastructure varies from three to over 6500 (DiMauro and Pehme 2021). Only during the WC, the Qataris admitted that hundreds of migrant workers died on related projects, although even that number is dismissed by human rights groups who argue that the death toll is likely in the thousands. The credibility and authenticity of Qatar 2022 were questioned throughout the tournament, with western media portraying the WC as synthetic and artificial (Ronay 2022c; Smith 2022) focusing on “fake fans,” shopping centers mimicking Venice or the Champs-Élysées and extravagant shows and orchestrated atmospheres, while much of the country is nothing but sand. According to Cull (2010), effective public diplomacy requires credibility. Yet, with Qatar, the lack of transparency around the exact number of deaths, along with the overwhelming accusations of corruption, the changes made moving the competition from its promised dates in the summer to winter, rescheduling the opening match, going back on promises to sell beer in venues in the last minute, restricting LGBTQ support in stadiums and other forms of social activism, and giving incredible numbers of attendance which were 110% of capacity in stadiums that were not full, all added questionable credibility of the Qataris and a negative projection of the normative image of the country. The death toll kept growing during the tournament, with at least two more migrant workers and two journalists dying while doing their jobs.

Yet, to classify Qatar 2022 as a nation branding disaster would be simplistic. Qatar’s propaganda machine was sophisticated and multifaceted, with Qatari-based network Al Jazeera counter-criticizing critics, paid ambassadors such as David Beckham speaking on behalf of the country, scholars from Qatari and Qatari-based academic institutions normalizing the country’s policies emphasizing the abolishment of the kafala system or through comparisons with other countries with similar policies, and of course through sponsoring and owning football clubs who visit there regularly, including Paris Saint Germain and its two poster boys Frenchman Kilyan Mbappe and Argentinian Lionel Messi, who conveniently faced each other in the final. Perhaps the most common tactic used by the Qataris and their supporters was whataboutism, deflecting the accusations of human rights violations by blaming other countries for their practices. As Boykoff (2022a, b) argues, sportswashing is not a practice done only by dictatorships but could be seen in western democracies, such as the colonial role of the Commonwealth Games in the British Empire, abuse of Native Americans’ rights in the United States and Canada, etc. The Qataris also used western public relations agents and agencies, western lawyers, and former western journalists to fight negative press in the UK (Waterson 2022) or sponsored American broadcasters (Draper 2022), which also provided more sterile coverage and focused on football or even on

Qatari tourism and culture rather than human right violations (Nisse 2022). These tactics, especially when emphasizing western hypocrisy, orientalism, the historic atrocities of European colonialism, or pointing out incidents of Islamophobia through stereotypical depictions of Arabs as terrorists (Al Jazeera Staff 2022a; Gjerovi 2022), have been proven effective to galvanize the global south behind Qatar (Hafez and Sanders 2022). A nation branding win, despite the history of abuse in the hosting country of migrant workers through the recently abolished kafala system and child slavery practices of using children from South Asia in camel races -often resulting in deaths or sexual exploitations. The use of child jockeys became illegal only in 2004 and they were replaced with robots.

Along with the countering arguments against western criticism, the Qataris made sure to oppress any form of resistance in the stadiums, banning banners and clothing including the rainbow symbol, and threatening captains who will wear the “One Love” armband with a yellow card, leading players to withdraw their original protests initiatives and to the German team to take a photo with their hands over their mouth for being silenced. While FIFA and the Qataris emphasized focusing on football and not on politics, the Qataris did allow one political cause to be raised through the competition which was supporting the Palestinian struggle. Palestinian flags, calls for Free Palestine, and disruption to Israeli media, were part of the scenery in Doha. With liberal media and progressive movements such as Black Lives Matter being sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, there was little criticism about such tactic, nor there was focus on the diverse Israeli broadcasting crew in Doha that included female captains of the national team, Israeli-Arab and openly gay panelists and on-field reporters and commentators. Through silencing every other form of social criticism, and enabling and even encouraging Palestinian support, images of Arab fans and players from Arab national teams such as Morocco waving the Palestinian flag, branded Qatar as a place that fostered Arab unity.

The classification of Qatar 2022 as a sportswashing success or failure, or even if it should be classified as under the sportswashing umbrella, is much in the eyes of the beholder. While some western journalists emphasized the death and suffering (Ronay 2022a, 2022b) in the summary of the competitions, in FIFA (Media Release 2022) and the Qatari academy (Reiche 2022) the tournament was framed as a win for the hosts. In an article titled “Qatar Won” (McTague 2022), Tom McTague from *The Atlantic* argues that the WC delivered on its PR potential, concluding:

The subliminal conclusion has crept up on me that the emirs of Qatar have subtly shifted global perceptions of their country and of the wider Arab world. All the corruption and migrant labor necessary to host the



event, all the Western criticism that came with being awarded the tournament, might actually have been worth it. All the world's a stage. But with this World Cup, it does not feel as though we are actors, but mere spectators, while the directors are in the wings, happy with their production.

Using Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) country image model, while the normative dimension of Qatar's image has been tarnished, overall, the tournament went as planned and the athletic competitions were entertaining, which positively reflects on the country's functional dimension. With future Asian competitions awarded to Qatar, this can perhaps indicate a boost for the sympathetic dimension, especially in the Arab world and the global south.

Nationalism in a globalized world

Geopolitics and manifestations of political conflicts intersect with international sports events (Chadwick 2022a; Dubinsky 2022b), and in terms of war and peace, football played a role in both (Brun and Gomez 2022). Perhaps the most well-known anecdote was the Christmas Truce during World War I, through which German and British soldiers laid down their weapons and played a game of football on the front line. On the other hand, "The Football War" refers to a 100 h war between Honduras and El Salvador that erupted following the 1970 WC qualification playoffs between the two countries, yet the dispute was unrelated to football. With football being the most popular sport in the world, and the world cup being the most prestigious international tournament with a rating of billions, geopolitical incidents are bound to arise. As mentioned, Mussolini used the 1934 FIFA WC to ignite Italian nationalism, the 1966 WC final between England and Germany revived the world wars memories and rivalries, the quarter final of the 1986 FIFA WC between Argentina and England was held under the political climate of the Falkland Islands War, West Germany won the 1990 FIFA WC during the process of the unification of Germany, Iran, and the USA played in a contested match in the 1998 WC group stage, Japan and Korea reconciled and collaborated when hosting the 2002 FIFA WC jointly, and of course, Russia used the 2018 WC as part of its long-term sportswashing plan to establish the country as a global force leading to an invasion to Ukraine in early 2022. Following the attack, FIFA banned Russia from continuing to participate in the WC qualification playoffs. There are of course many more examples of intersections between international politics and the FIFA WC. Qatar 2022 was no different in the sense of reflecting political power struggles but was unique as for the first time the WC was held in the complex Middle East, in an

Arab and Muslim country, having local, regional, and global geopolitical impacts.

The complexity of Middle East geopolitics manifested since Qatar won the bid in 2010 and until the cup was awarded in 2022. On one hand, Qatar branded the competition as a regional celebration of the Arab world in the Middle East, yet all the games were held in the country rather than shared with other GCC countries (Tifo Football 2022). During the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011, the Qataris played an active role through Al Jazeera to criticize existing regimes and fuel protests and revolutions across the Arab world. Furthermore, due to the close ties of Qatar with Iran and fundamentalist Muslim organizations, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries cut ties with Qatar. These internal disputes within the Arab world prevented a joint effort to host the WC across multiple countries. Yet, during the competitions, the Qataris took pride that Arab countries that qualified, including Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and especially Morocco, felt like playing on home turf. Despite the top three Muslim players in the world Ballon d'Or⁴ winner Frenchman Kareem Benzema (injury), the Senegalese runner-up Sadio Mane (injury) and Mohammad Salah from Egypt (did not qualify), missing the WC, Arab and Muslim countries had many moments to celebrate including Saudi Arabia shocking Argentina and Tunisia beating France in the group stage, and Morocco becoming the first African country to qualify to the semi-final, beating Belgium, Spain, and Portugal on the way. The Saudi's victory along with the close relations between FIFA President Infantino and the Royal Family and the country's ongoing sportswashing strategies (Boykoff 2022a, b), led to speculations about the country being awarded to host a future world cup, potentially even in 2030. Overall, the attempts to celebrate Arab culture and Arab unity were successful, although there was an incident in which a journalist from the UAE spread fake news about the Qataris bribing the referee in the opening match to secure a home victory (Owen Jones 2022). Despite being the reigning Asian champions, the Qatari national team was the least successful host in world cup history, losing all its three group stages matches and finishing last, despite the country's long-term plan to naturalize foreign-born players through their Aspire Academy to make the team competitive (VOX 2022). One of the lessons Cull (2010) shares is that public diplomacy is not always about you, and in the case of Qatar 2022, by glorifying the success of other Arab countries, the Qataris managed to better position themselves as authentic champions of the Arab world.

National identity is drawn from social identity theory based on nationality, shared myths, history, language,

⁴ The Ballon d'Or is a prestigious individual annual prize awarded to the best football player of the year.



customs, etc. (David and Bar-Tal 2009), and is a component of nation branding and country image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015), classified by Fan (2010) as cultural branding. The question of Arab identity was raised constantly throughout the tournament. One of the symbols of Pan-Arab pride was the popularity of the Palestinian flag not just across Doha (Alsaafin 2022; Khatib 2022), but by players, especially from the national team of Morocco, and the overwhelming support of the Palestinian cause. Raising the Palestinian cause and criticizing Israel was endorsed also by western scholars who have criticized the Qatari organization repeatedly for sportswashing (Boykoff and Zirin 2022) but referred to the Palestinian flag waving as “fearless” (Zirin and Boykoff 2022), which created some common ground even between the host and the liberal west. Through the competitions, Al Jazeera kept reinforcing these narratives, not just as a symbol of unity, but as a form of resistance by the people of Arab countries, rejecting the normalization agreements of the Abraham Accords, signed by different Arab countries, including Morocco and the UAE, with Israel, normalizing relations between countries, especially through trade (Alsaafin 2022; Khatib 2022). The attempts of the Qataris to undermine governments and regimes and incite resistance through the Qatari-based international network Al Jazeera is not new and was a useful tactic during the Arab Spring. So while there might be some authenticity in the Pro-Palestinian support and Arab unity during the WC, the Qataris also used it, or even orchestrated it, to serve their foreign policy goals. Furthermore, the emphasis on Pro-Palestinian supporters disturbing Israeli media or fans resisting being interviewed (Alsaafin 2022; Jerusalem Post Staff 2022; Khatib 2022), led to reports of a wave of antisemitism and incitement of violence against Israelis in Palestinian media, with a stereotypical depiction of Jews as greedy (Leshem 2022).

Another aspect of Arab identity was nationality and globalization. While the critics of Qatar 2022 focused on migrant workers, this WC was also unique in terms of immigrant players and naturalized players playing for countries where they were not born in (Vox 2022). Out of the 830 players registered to play in Qatar 2022, 137 were not born in the country they represented, making it 16.5% or 1 out of 6—the highest number or percentage in any WC (Vox 2022). Two of the leading countries in these categories were Morocco with the most players not born in the country (14) and Qatar with the most players who received citizenship to play football for the country (7). The national origin of players can increase the richness and diversity within a country or a national team. Perhaps the most common examples are Mozambique-born “Black Panther” Eusébio who starred for Portugal in the 1960s, and the ethnic diversity in the French national teams in 1998 and 2018 which won the competitions much thanks to Muslim players from families

that immigrated from North Africa and players who were either born or their families immigrated from other African former French colonies. The unprecedented success of Morocco became the first Arab and African team to reach the semi-final of the WC, was a cause for celebration of uniting Africa and the Arab world (Alsaafin 2022; Fisher 2022), but also raised questions about the integration of Moroccan and Arab communities within Europe. Not only the majority of the players on the national team decided to represent Morocco and not the countries they were born in, but while the Moroccans were playing, riots between fans erupted across Europe, especially in France and Belgium (Braddick and Kraterou 2022), putting a question mark not just about the integration of immigrant communities in European countries, but also on the success of the European Union and European identity. Such riots were especially evident and violence following the semi-final tie after Morocco lost to its former colonizer France. Thus, once again, implications of colonization emerged during the competitions.

With Russia suspended and Ukraine not qualifying from the playoffs, perhaps the most politically contested match in the competition was between the USA and Iran, which also determined who will qualify for the round of 16. There was some provocation in the form of the American TV network FOX not showing the Iranian flag in one incident (Botte 2022), yet instead of being a clash between two regimes or ideologies, the focus was mostly internally on Iran and the Iranian players’ support of domestic women’s protests against their regime. After not singing the national anthem in the first match of the competition and having the crowd boo as a protest against the Iranian regime and in support of Iranian women refusing to bow down to the discriminatory modesty police following the death of Masha Amini (Eurosport 2022), the players were gradually forced to sing along in their next matches, while the crowd kept booing. As mentioned, Qatar has strong ties with Iran and played its role in restricting further support of the resistance. Furthermore, Qatar has also been scrutinized for its gender laws, including needing a male guardian’s permission to study abroad or not having a functional women’s national team (Harpur 2022). Gender is an integral part of American sports diplomacy with the Department of State promoting Title IX—an anti-sex discrimination legislation in the education system from 1972 that led to women’s sports blossoming in America—and the US Women’s National Team (USWNT) breaking gender barriers in local and international football, fighting for gender equality, social rights including LGBTQ, and better payment (Woods and Butler 2021). While American women dominate international competitions, American men never won a WC and did not even qualify for the tournament in Russia in 2018. Thus, the tie between Iran and the USA, which was held during political tension between the countries about the nuclear deal and the Iranian support of



Russia during the war in Ukraine (Al Jazeera Staff 2022b) became less about the political rivalry and tension between the countries, but more about gender perception in Iran, the Arab World, and even in America.

Dubinsky (2022a, 2022b) identified athletes-to-people diplomacy, athletes' activism, and gender as part of public diplomacy efforts in international sports, yet in Qatar, due to the hosts' restrictions, such issues manifested differently than in the Super Bowl in the USA or the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The Americans, hosts of the next WC in 2026, despite having the rainbow colors in their training ground when arriving in Qatar, did not form vocal or visual forms of protests during the competitions and normalized the Qatari hosts through Qatari-sponsored broadcasting, and England who played in the same group as USA and Iran not wearing the "One Love" armband fearing to be sanctioned with a yellow card (Panja 2022), positioned the Iranian team as brave fighters for human rights and gender equality, while the leading western countries played along with discriminatory policies.

Everyone can engage in cultural diplomacy

The esthetic dimension of a country's image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) pertains to the cultural and historic heritage associated with a country, along with its beauty, scenery, nightlife, and other touristic attractions. This is very much associated with nation branding analysis through place branding, or tourism-destination-image (TDI) lenses, when analyzing a place as a tourism destination (Anholt 2010; Fan 2010). Both hosting and participating countries find cultural diplomacy opportunities during mega sports events to improve the esthetic dimensions of their country's image and brand the country as a more attractive tourism destination. Some of the more common uses are the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games in which countries expose their culture and history, showing different parts of the country or using iconic venues as part of the organizing committee's plan, or trying to show the national character of the country through the diversity of the players or even fans (Arning 2013; Dubinsky 2019, 2022b). The FIFA WC has less flashy ceremonies than in the Olympics but does provide cultural diplomacy opportunities. Perhaps the most known example is Shakira's version of "Waka Waka"—a rendition of the traditional African song that became the anthem of the South Africa 2010 WC. Due to the ongoing controversies and international criticism, while some A-list artists from western countries refused to perform in the ceremonies in Qatar (Gray 2022), K-pop stars did, enhancing South Korean soft power (Chadwick and Widdop 2022). In his book "Imaginative Communities, Govers (2018) discusses the transformation of stereotypical and cliché

depictions of places by international audiences through globalization. Govers (2018) defines imaginative communities as "neighbourhoods, cities, regions, and countries—possibly even continents—that reinforce or build local character and civic pride, while at the same time captivating outsiders (external publics)" (p. 17). He (Govers 2018) uses the 2006 FIFA WC to argue that even if the event was an economic burden, it had a positive impact as well with Germans being perceived as friendlier and welcoming, contradicting stereotypical assumptions of Germans being formal with no sense of humor.

Qatar might not have the historic richness of other Arab or Muslim countries such as Iran, Egypt, or Morocco, or touristic venues with similar cultural significance as Cairo or Casablanca have, but focusing on Arab traditions was perceived as authentic through experiencing Souq Wakif (Ahmed 2022) as an Arab market, the mascot La'eeb shaped as a traditional Arabic hairdresser (Pope 2022) and the structures and names of the stadiums (Baxter 2022) referring to Arabic and Qatari traditions. With all stadiums being within less than two hours from Doha, the Qatari capital was the center of the tournament, not requiring fans and delegations to switch hotels when traveling between games. Perhaps the most innovative feature Qatar 2022 introduced was the temporary Stadium 974, built through 974 recycled shipping containers that could be dismantled and reconstructed at a different location (Baxter 2022). On the other hand, the attempt to show Doha as modern and developed through exposing extravagant wealth and building shopping centers mimicking western cities was often portrayed as synthetic or artificial (Ronay 2022c; Smith 2022). Perhaps the most contested cultural diplomacy moment was one of the last frames of the WC, as Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani put a Bisht, a traditional Arab cloak, on Leo Messi just before the Argentinian captain lifted the world cup (Guardian Sport 2022). A moment that was interpreted in the Arab world as an acknowledgment of the highest respect (Church 2022), was scrutinized in western media for being another artificially orchestrated photo-op for FIFA and the Qataris, using Leo Messi, who plays for Qatari-owned PSG and associated with formerly Qatari-sponsored FC Barcelona, as a propaganda prop to once again enhance Qatar's image, even in his and Argentina's long-awaited moment of glory.

Participating national teams, federations and fans also used Qatar 2022 for cultural diplomacy purposes, especially through national identity which Fan (2010) refers to as cultural branding. Some countries take pride in the style of play or approach to the game as a reflection of national character. Joga Bonito, a beautiful play, is associated with the free-spirited and creative Brazilian individual skills that refer also to a culture of dance, samba, and Carnival. The Brazilians hold the record of winning five world cups, and in Qatar dancing and singing became a team tradition when



going off the buses and before matches. Uruguay, a small country that historically over-performs on the world stage winning the competition twice, follow the “Garra Charrua” mentality of playing with pride and fearlessness. In Qatar, the smallest country that went the furthest was Croatia, which finished third after being runners-up in 2018. Their sense of pride comes from the expression “tko će kome ako ne svoj svome”—who will help you if not your own (Daskal 2022) building on the country’s national pride all through the football field. The success of such countries on the world stage also exposes such types of mentalities associated with national character. Morocco, the most surprising country in the competition became the first African national team to qualify for the semi-final, galvanized the Arab world behind it not just because of its success but also through celebrating Arab culture by praying together after matches and players hugging and kissing their mothers, demonstrating respect to parents and the significance of family. Fans’ behavior also has an impact on national character, with Arab fans from different countries waving the Palestinian flag as a demonstration of Arab unity, or Japanese fans cleaning the stands following their matches to show their values (Chadwick and Widdop 2022).

There are also more structured ways through which federations exhibited the esthetic dimensions of participating countries, such as through jersey diplomacy and squad announcement videos. While the Mexican official jersey also included Aztec designs tributing to the country’s natives (Hernandez 2022), there was some controversy between the North African countries of Morocco and Algeria, as the Moroccan Culture Ministry claimed the designs of the Algerian Adidas jerseys were culturally appropriating Moroccan culture (Cursino 2022). In recent years federations use social media videos to announce their squad selection including using nation branding lenses. Uruguay, for example, displayed the childhood cities and towns of all the selected players, thus showing the landscape and people of the country (Selección Uruguay 2022). Canada and Switzerland focused also on the social diversity of the countries, showing also open members from the LGBTQ community, perhaps as a defiance against the discriminative laws in Qatar or to differentiate them from the hosts and position themselves as more liberal, free, and progressive (Canada Soccer 2022; Nati 2022). Other ways in which the esthetic dimension of participating countries was exposed were through reactions to results, celebrating Australian fans gathering together in the Confederation Square in Melbourne, national holidays in Saudi Arabia following the group stage win over Argentina (ESPN 2022), and in Argentina after winning the competition (Reuters 2022) and generally viral videos of the Argentinian commentator broadcasting the winning penalty as his country wins the world cup and the emotional celebrations in Buenos Aires. Thus, because of globalization and

the multi-use of media platforms, from cultural diplomacy and tourism-destination-image perspectives, host countries, participating national teams, and federations, visiting fans or even fans in their home countries, can all have an impact on a country’s esthetic dimension during the world cup.

Sustainability, inclusion, and greenwashing

Nation branding and public diplomacy do not start and end with the hosting country (Cull 2010; Dubinsky 2022b). While Cull (2010) emphasizes that public diplomacy is everyone’s business including citizens and not just governments, Dubinsky (2022b) refers also to the intersections with sports and global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, or the social and natural environments. In that sense, Qatar 2022 was unique as it was the largest mega-events held following the pandemic without major-related restrictions as both the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games had fans restrictions and multiple testing policies, and unlike previous WC it was held in the winter. Having the WC in the winter was a source of controversy, as the original bid promised a summer competition in air-conditioned stadiums, yet the heat in Qatar made it unfeasible risking the safety of fans and people traveling between games (DiMauro and Pehme 2021). While the decision to change the dates to November/December 2022 was used as another reason to discredit the organization and the country, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, it also allowed more flexibility for other sports events originally scheduled for 2021 to reschedule their competitions to the summer of 2022 following the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games to the summer of 2021. On one hand, having the WC in the winter required leagues around the world to adjust their schedules and shorten breaks, which had negative financial impacts on European leagues and perhaps added to players’ burnout and injuries. On the other, the change was also seen as another form of resistance against European dominance of the sport, with FIFA welcoming future winter WC bids—perhaps from Saudi Arabia.

FIFA, the IOC, organizing committees, and governments receive local and international backlash for unsustainable practices when bidding or hosting mega-events, which damage the environment, end with financial loss, and with unused stadiums that become white elephants (Boykoff 2022b; Dubinsky 2022a, b). The estimated costs of Qatar 2022 range between \$200–300 billion, making it the most expensive sports event in history, more than any Olympic Games, and more than all previous WC combined. This has also been a point of controversy, not just because of the death toll ranging from hundreds to thousands of migrant workers who died working on the project (Ingle



2022), but also because of the impact on the natural environment and climate change. Qatar built eight new stadiums predominantly for this competition (Boykoff 2022b; Boykoff and Zirin 2022). Justifications focus on the nation building aspect of using the event to modernize Doha and the country and having the 974 Stadium dismantled and moved to a needed country, reducing capacities of other stadiums, or winning future sports events in which the stadiums will be used. The Qataris and FIFA argue the WC was sustainable, being the first carbon-neutral WC in history (Boykoff 2022b). Critical scholar Jules Boykoff (2022b) dismisses FIFA and the Qataris' framing of a sustainable WC as greenwashing, refuting the arguments about carbon neutral, criticizing FIFA for embracing Qatar's gas strategy, and refers to the event as "a climate Qatarstrophe."

From the international organization's angle, FIFA (Media Release 2022) framed the competitions as the best WC ever and celebrating revenues of \$7.5 billion in the 2019–2023 cycle and projecting further growth in the 2023–2026 one to over \$11 billion. While FIFA's and Qatar's credibility have been consistently discredited (Boykoff 2022b; Boykoff and Zirin 2022; Sky News 2022), there are also lessons to be learned and applied in future competitions. Qatar 2022 was relatively logistically comfortable for delegations having permanent training grounds, and fans and journalists who could attend multiple games per day and did not need to spend time and money flight and checking in and out of hotels almost daily. That will not be the case in the next WC being held in the USA, Mexico, and Canada, and the number of national teams competing increased from 32 to 48. Although all stadiums already exist, the distance between cities and venues will require almost daily flights, at times crossing time zones and national borders, which will add to the fatigue of the players, the expenses of fans traveling to support their teams, and harm the natural environment. Moving forward, perhaps FIFA should consider more mixed models of dividing the WC into regional zones with existing venues relatively nearby which will enable multiple countries to take part in hosting the competitions, but will also enable longer stays in the same place and reduce the needed local and international flights. While there was much international criticism over social inclusion and discrimination of LGBTQ communities, Qatar 2022 was also praised for being inclusive to Muslim visitors and Muslim women, for personal safety, and for having a family-friendly atmosphere due to the religious restrictions on alcohol (Ahmed 2022). With gun violence occurring daily in America (GVA 2022), the personal safety of fans in 2026 should be a major concern for the hosts. Thus, although Qatar 2022 led to cultural, political, and

ideological clashes, there are also lessons to be learned and applied, including by the global North.

Conclusion

Whether the WC was used for nation building or for sportswashing purposes, if it was unifying or divisive, authentic, or artificial, the legacy of Qatar 2022 remains to be seen and will most likely stay in the eyes of the beholders. FIFA tries to create a narrative about Qatar 2022 as being the "best ever" WC, football being spread in the Arab and Muslim world and the global south, and leading positive change by developing a desert country that abolished the exploitative kafala system (Media Release 2022; Olley 2022). Qatar has had victory moments, becoming the first Arab, Muslim, and Middle-Eastern country to host such a significant mega-event and making sure that even during the coronation moment of lifting the world cup, Leo Messi, a poster boy of Qatari-owned PSG, will wear their traditional outfit. For critics, the competition reinforced the existing scrutiny on the lack of care for human lives, corruption, and discrimination. As Barney Ronay (2022a) from *The Guardian* summarized: "It was costly, carbon-heavy, bloodstained and corruption-shadowed but this micromanaged power play couldn't have gone much better for the hosts" (Ronay 2022a). Beyond anything else, Qatar 2022 exposed differences in cultures, opinions, politics, and ideologies, between nations, and people, and raises a paradoxical and opposing question if inclusion also means hosting sports events in discriminatory countries and societies that will use the exposure for their nation branding purposes, or only in those that the west approves?

This case study identified, explored, and discussed five areas of dualities that impact nation branding and related fields: (a) Clashes of civilizations and colonial imperialism, (b) Sportswashing, soft Power, and nation building, (c) Nationalism in a globalized world, (d) Everyone can engage in cultural diplomacy, and (e) Sustainability, inclusion, and greenwashing. In all five areas, there is not just one consistent or prevailing message, but clashes of perceptions, or even oppositions. Using Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) four-dimensional country image model, while there is some agreement that the functional dimension of Qatar's image was enhanced for the delivery of the competition leading to further interest in hosting sports even in the country and region, the normative one was tarnished, especially by western media. With a discredited reputation, a country's foreign policy attempts are less effective. Whether the esthetic and sympathetic dimensions of Qatar's image were enhanced or negatively impacted, or the if the overall image of Qatar improved, would require further analysis and a different research design. Qatar 2022 might or might not be a pivotal



point in the country's or even the region's history and trajectory, but nation branding, soft power, and cultural diplomacy are long-term plays, with country image being a very fragile, inconsistent, and sometimes subjective outcome.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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