

LUISS



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Course of Neuromarketing

CAN FOOTBALL IMPROVE A TARNISHED REPUTATION?

**INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL FOR INTERNATIONAL
FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT ORGANIZATION TO ENHANCE THE
PERCEIVED IMAGE OF AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE IN
EUROPE**

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1) INTRODUCTION

In 2015, British comedian Lee Nelson illegally entered the FIFA headquarters in Zurich and proceeded to scatter numerous fake banknotes around the area where Sepp Blatter, the president of FIFA at the time, was seated during a conference. He identified himself as a representative from North Korea attending the World Cup event. “Sepp, this is for North Korea 2026 [...], it makes sense for everyone”, he stated while being escorted outside the room ¹.

The incident was met with disbelief by those attending the conference, and, later, pictures of a confused Blatter sitting under a shower of cash caused great hilarity on the internet. Nevertheless, the satirical stunt pointed the finger towards an issue that had become the elephant in the changing room of European football. The event had happened five years after FIFA chose to award the 2018 and 2022 editions of the World Cup to Russia and Qatar, respectively. One thing that the two countries have in common is that they are both run by governments that are, to a significant degree, authoritarian². FIFA was increasingly and undeniably associating itself with states that raised serious concerns about the freedom enjoyed by the people living within their borders. This was, however, no big news, as undemocratic states had been funneling money into European football through sponsorships and acquisitions of major football teams for years ³. The big news was, in fact, that for the first time in modern football, those countries were able to take on a leading role and bring the realization of major international competition to their homes.

For a country seeking influence over international football, the consequences of hosting a tournament like the FIFA World Cup are significantly different from those that result from sponsoring or even acquiring a team. The organization of a prestigious event such as the World Cup brings with it a set of implications that affect, among other things, the image that the country hosting the tournament projects to the public. People’s judgements of a country mimic those attitudes that they hold towards brands, involving both emotional and rational

¹ The Guardian (2015). Prankster showers Sepp Blatter with dollar bills at Fifa press conference. *Guardian Sport*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/jul/20/sepp-blatter-fifa-dollar-bills-press-conference-lee-nelson>

² Freedom in the World 2023. *Freedom House*. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf

³ Thani, S., & Heenan, T. (2017). The ball may be round but football is becoming increasingly Arabic: Oil money and the rise of the new football order. *Soccer & Society*, 18(7), 1012-1026.

aspects. By organizing the tournament, a country can offer cues for the evaluation of its image that are drastically different from those on which people could have initially formed their judgements.

Moreover, when the host country is put in the spotlight, new sets of eyes are scanning the social, political, and economic dynamics that govern it. On the one hand, this is a one-of-a-kind occasion to influence the international narrative that accompanies that country by showcasing, for example, its economic prosperity, cultural heritage, and technological advancement. Redefining the image that the public perceives of it allows a country to tell its own tale, deciding for itself where to appear more internationally compliant and where to emphasize its national identity. On the other hand, especially when the host countries' governments present authoritarian traits, among all those eyes that suddenly turn towards the country hosting the tournament, some might not like what they find and loudly voice their concerns.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to investigate whether the efforts of an authoritarian state in organizing an international football competition such as the FIFA World Cup can reward that country with an improved reputation in the eyes of the European public. We will try to empirically assess whether the organization of a major international football competition can improve the image that European citizens perceive of the authoritarian state hosting it.

The study will be structured as follows. The next section will contextualize the research within the existing body of literature on sports and politics. We will delineate the narrative that has seen the rise of football to the global dimension that it enjoys today, the progressive involvement of authoritarian states in international football, and the resulting consequences. We will conclude section 2 by establishing the research gap this study is addressing. Section 3 will be dedicated to the experimental research. We will define the research questions, formulate the hypothesis, describe the experiment, and analyze the results. Finally, section 4 will delve into the discussion of the results of the analysis, and the theoretical and managerial implications that it warrants. We will conclude by stating the shortcomings and limitations of this thesis and recommending future research directions.

2) LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The FIFA World Cup

The relationship between sports and politics is complex and multifaceted, with various interconnections and implications. Throughout history, sports have often been intertwined with political strategies, serving as a platform for expressing national identity, promoting ideologies, and shaping public opinion. Just a few of the many key political and social goals that scholars have observed this relationship to aim at are, for example, patriotism, diplomacy, boycotts and protests, and athlete activism⁴. One feature of sports that has historically enjoyed a special relationship with politics and national governments is the organization of international sporting events, especially Sports Mega Events (SMEs). SMEs can be described as large, globally recognized sports competitions that capture the attention of millions of people worldwide and leave a lasting impact on the host country's sports culture, economy, and international reputation. The two events that today fall under the definition of SME are the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup⁵.

The topic of this research is limited to the latter, mainly because of the global relevance that football has achieved in the last few years. The size of the professional soccer market in Europe has nearly doubled since 2010 (Figure 1)⁶, reaching a value of almost 30 billion euros.

⁴ Fruh, K., Archer, A., & Wojtowicz, J. (2023). Sportswashing: Complicity and corruption. *Sport, ethics and philosophy*, 17(1), 101-118.

⁴ Garcia, B., & Amara, M. (2013). Media perceptions of Arab investment in European football clubs: the case of Malaga and Paris Saint-Germain. Loughborough University.

⁵ Grix, J., & Brannagan, P. M. (2016). Of mechanisms and myths: Conceptualising states' "soft power" strategies through sports mega-events. *Diplomacy & statecraft*, 27(2), 251-272. DOI: 10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791

⁶ Statista Research Department (2023). "Market size of the professional soccer market in Europe from 2010/2011 to 2021/2022" [chart]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/261223/european-soccer-market-total-revenue/>

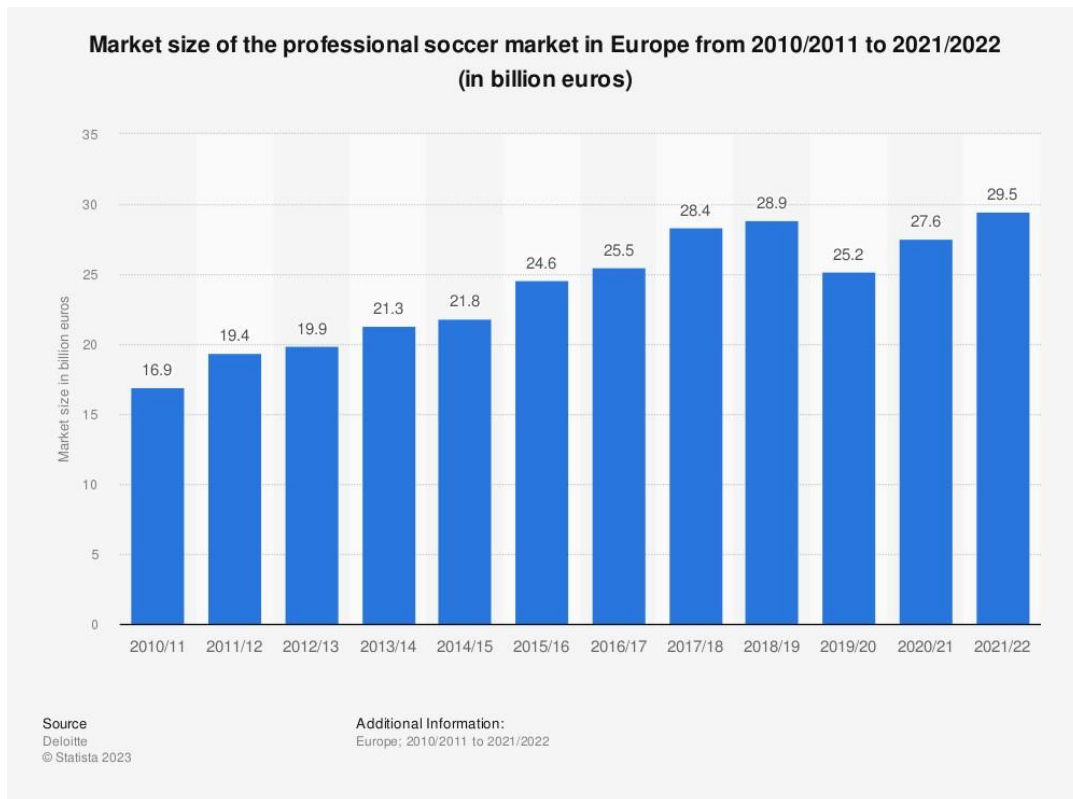


Figure 1 – Market size

Several factors have contributed to the recent surge in football's popularity. Football is one of the most accessible and widely played sports in the world, and the growth of television, internet streaming, and social media has significantly increased the visibility and accessibility of football matches. Fans can watch games live from anywhere, fostering a global community of football enthusiasts. Major international competitions draw immense attention and captivate audiences around the world, bolstered by the presence of superstars like Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Neymar who capture the imagination of millions. Football has a significant impact on culture and society as well, connecting people across national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. It has become more than just a sport, representing identity, community, and shared values.

This ever-growing trend in football popularity can also be imputed to the global expansion over the years of FIFA, the international governing body of association football. FIFA was

able to generate in 2022 the highest figure recorded since at least 2003, a colossal 5.7 billion U.S. dollars in revenue (Figure 2)⁷.

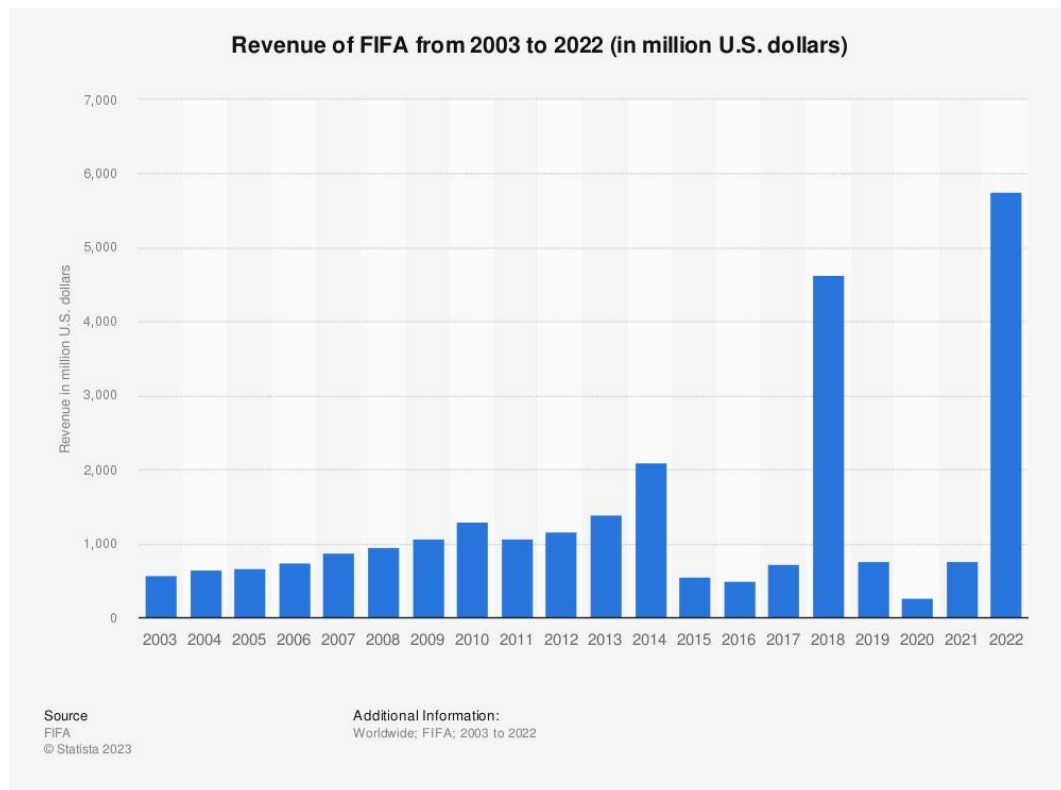


Figure 2 – Revenue of FIFA from 2003 to 2022

Considering the World Cup, official data concerning the 2022 Qatari edition reveal a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators, up from the 3 million of its Russian predecessor in 2018. Moreover, the final match collected a record 1.5 billion people around the world in watching a pulsating final between Argentina and France, again surpassing the 1.12 billion for the previous edition’s final in Moscow⁸. If we consider fan’s interactions with FIFA’s digital channels, Qatar 2022 engaged more fans than ever before, with a 24% increase in digital channel visits compared to the 2018 edition and with social engagements up 448% compared to the previous tournament. Having reached such peaks, global interest in football does not seem intended to decline at all, and it is safe to imagine that expectations for the

⁷ Statista Research Department (2023). “Revenue of FIFA from 2003 to 2022” [chart]. *Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268873/revenue-of-the-football-association-fifa/>

⁸ The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ in numbers [white paper]. *FIFA*. Available at: <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/546158158e52f1c9/original/The-FIFA-World-Cup-Qatar-2022-in-numbers.pdf>

2026 edition, to be held in Canada, Mexico, and the USA, are for an even more appealing, engaging, and global event.

2.2 Football & Europe, a special relationship

Albeit a global phenomenon, football shares a special relationship with Europe and European citizens. For this reason, the current study is focused on the potential change in the perception of an authoritarian state that organizes a major international football competition from the perspective of European citizens.

Football has played a significant role in influencing European identity, intertwining sportsmanship, national pride, and cultural exchange across the continent. The sport's popularity in Europe has transcended borders, uniting diverse nations and communities under a common passion for the game. On the other hand, Europe itself has largely shaped football and football institutions. De Witte and Zgliniski⁹ have gone as far as theorizing a Europeanization of football, which they define as “*the way in which the world of football has internalized the different ways in which Europe manifests itself*”. A first step toward the Europeanization of football can be found in the 1995 Bosman ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) overturned the restriction on the number of non-national players within a team and reduced the transfer fee requirements for players⁹. Players whose contracts expired were declared free to sign with any club without any compensation to be paid for their services. This resulted in a higher mobilization of football players throughout the EU. The football barriers between European countries were being torn down. The identity of a football club, which is closely tied to its local history and traditions, was now taking on European characteristics as, for example, its star player now comes from Austria, its team captain is Greek, and its manager is Portuguese, despite the club's strong connection to a particular geographic location.

While club teams were now profoundly globalized with high influxes of foreign players, the ownerships and business models of the clubs themselves remained grounded to relatively local levels. The same goes for the revenue streams associated with the exploitation of

⁹ De Witte, F., & Zgliniski, J. (2022). The idea of Europe in football. *European Law Open*, 1(2), 286-315.

football commercial rights¹⁰. This was soon going to change, but more on that later. This double reality of globalization and localization of European football, nevertheless, had little or no effect on the fans' identification with the players and teams⁹, meanwhile skyrocketing the game to a popularity that was never seen before. Supporters' priorities rested on the quality and loyalty of the players, rather than their nationalities. Football is made European as far as it is committed to certain values, includes the celebration of local spaces and identities, and revolves around sporting merit and solidarity. The European football community was quick to voice these ideals as soon as the announcement of a European Super League (ESL) was made in 2021¹¹. The dynamics of this competition were seen by many as in stark contradiction with the values of European football, as the participation of most of the teams that populated the tournament would be guaranteed and not tied to the performances of those teams in their home championships. Fans reacted furiously, lamenting the marginalization of their interests and roles in the name of profit. Despite the efforts of just a few teams, the ESL does not seem to have a bright future ahead of it, at least not in its current guise.

A further aspect that has characterized the relationship between football and Europe has been the creation of trans-European club competitions. These competitions are, today, the UEFA Champions League, the Europa League, and the Conference League. Teams can qualify for the tournaments by achieving high placements in the national leagues they compete in. Fans that follow their teams in their European campaigns are exposed to even more 'Europe,' following their teams in locations that would otherwise have little or no tourist appeal and witnessing high-profile matches dense in symbolic meaning⁹. Flags are waved, anthems are chanted, sponsorship deals are displayed. Fans do not necessarily only follow these competitions if the team they support has qualified, as it is often the case that the clubs that compete in them are understood to represent their countries. Michael Billig has provided a theorization of such symbolism, which constitutes in his words a 'mindless reminder' of the inhabitation of daily life within nation-states; he defines it as "Banal Nationalism"¹². Banal nationalism refers to the ways in which nationalism is 'subtly and routinely reproduced in

¹⁰ Garcia, B., & Amara, M. (2013). Media perceptions of Arab investment in European football clubs: the case of Malaga and Paris Saint-Germain. Loughborough University.

¹¹ Ogden, M. (2021). "Super League is wanted only by a cabal of Europe's elite club owners; fans have been forgotten". *ESPN*. Available at: https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37616274/super-league-only-wanted-cabal-europe-elite-club-owners-fans-forgotten

¹² Skey, M. (2009). The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig's thesis of Banal Nationalism. *The Sociological Review*, 57(2), 331-346. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.0183

everyday life’, often without explicit awareness or overt nationalist sentiments. Unlike the overt and extreme expressions of nationalism seen in rallies and parades, banal nationalism operates in more subtle and commonplace ways, which makes it all the more pervasive and enduring. Some of the key features of banal nationalism are a nation’s language, its symbols and icons, currency, and, of course, sports. Building on Billig’s work, Regina Weber applied the concept of banal nationalism to the development of European club football¹³. Everyday practices, symbols, and cultural engagement in football as spectators serve to reaffirm the idea of Europe. Billig terms this routine exposure "enhabitation," drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which refers to internalized practices that become almost second nature, allowing individuals to navigate their everyday lives¹⁴. Football thus serves as a tool for “enhabitating” European identity.

Weber points out that in contrast to other factors that bolster European feelings like cross-border education or professional activities, football is not limited to a privileged few, making it accessible to a broader segment of the population. Banal Europeanism in football has the potential to introduce Europe to a wider group of average citizens who may not typically hold pro-European views. While pointing out that empirical evidence supporting these assumptions is limited, the author underlines that the significant impact of sports as a potential vehicle for European integration should not be underestimated. This is to say that, although overt European sentiment cannot be presumed to be shared by most of the European population, football is able to provide a shared experience that could potentially contribute to a sense of European identity among a diverse and broader range of citizens. This insight underpins an assumption that lies behind the current research. In investigating the image that the European population holds of an authoritarian state, the assumption is that there exists a shared and wide-ranging European identity and, moreover, that such an identity is shaped, at least to some extent, by football and international football tournaments in particular. In the words of Anthony King, ‘*football is nothing more, but also nothing less, than an almost perfect reflection of social and economic processes*’¹⁵.

¹³ Weber, R. (2021). Banal Europeanism? Europeanisation of football and the inhabitation of a Europeanised football fandom. *Sport in Society*, 24(11), 1893-1909. DOI 10.1080/17430437.2021.1893697

¹⁴ Billig, M. (1995). Banal nationalism. *Banal nationalism*, 1-208.

¹⁵ King, A. (Ed.). (2002). Leaders' personalities and the outcomes of democratic elections. *OUP Oxford*.

2.3 The buildup to a global stage

Since the establishment of the game in the late 19th century, football has experienced a dramatic evolution. Giulianotti¹⁶ provided a characterization of its transformation over the last century and a half by defining three stages it has gone through. Football's 'traditional' era, lasting until after the First World War, was concerned with setting up the rules, forming national associations, and diffusing the sport internationally. The 'modern' era, spanning from the 1920s to the late 1980s, saw the beginning of football's rise to stardom. The World Cup brought the sport to a global dimension, players became superstars, continental confederations of national football associations, like UEFA, came into existence as an additional level of governance for the sport, and television became increasingly common in households, enabling the talent of top players to gain global recognition. Notably, especially late in the 'modern' era, club revenues from sponsorship and merchandising surpassed gate receipts, becoming the primary source of income.

In the late 1980s football had entered the 'post-modern era' it lives in today. This new era entails a significant commercialization of sports, with television companies gaining considerable control over clubs and funding the game. As a symbol of this modern football era, there are now brand-new or completely renovated stadiums. However, this new approach, focused on maximizing income through television deals and ticket distribution policies, can sometimes harm the interests of the most dedicated fans. In the "post-modern" era, football fans represent a new middle class, characterized as a group eager to create and consume various football media. The influx of television revenues has greatly benefited top clubs, turning tournaments into a massive business, and enabling elite players to enjoy higher wages than ever before (Giulianotti 1999).

What best characterizes the 'post-modern' era of football is its commercialization, deeply connected to the rise in revenues generated from the sale of broadcasting rights for the game. Revenues associated with Europe's top professional football leagues have increased on average by 115% from 1999 to 2011¹⁷. This, nevertheless, is only one side of the story. A doubling in the commercial value of European football also meant that wages were increasing. In the 2010-11 Premier League season, the ratio of wages to revenue was at

¹⁶ Giulianotti, R. (1999). *Football: A sociology of the global game*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 160(5).

¹⁷ García, B., & Amara, M. (2013). *Media perceptions of Arab investment in European football clubs: the case of Malaga and Paris Saint-Germain*. Loughborough University.

70%¹⁸, and things are not so different today. According to a recent analysis by Deloitte, Manchester United and Manchester City, two major revenue-generating clubs in the Premier League, had wage costs that accounted for 65% and 62% of their income in the 2020/21 season, respectively. Fulham, in a desperate attempt to remain in the top flight during that particular season, faced the burden of wage bills that amounted to a staggering 98% of their revenue in their last season in the Premier League, their wage bill being almost as big as their income (Figure 3)¹⁹.

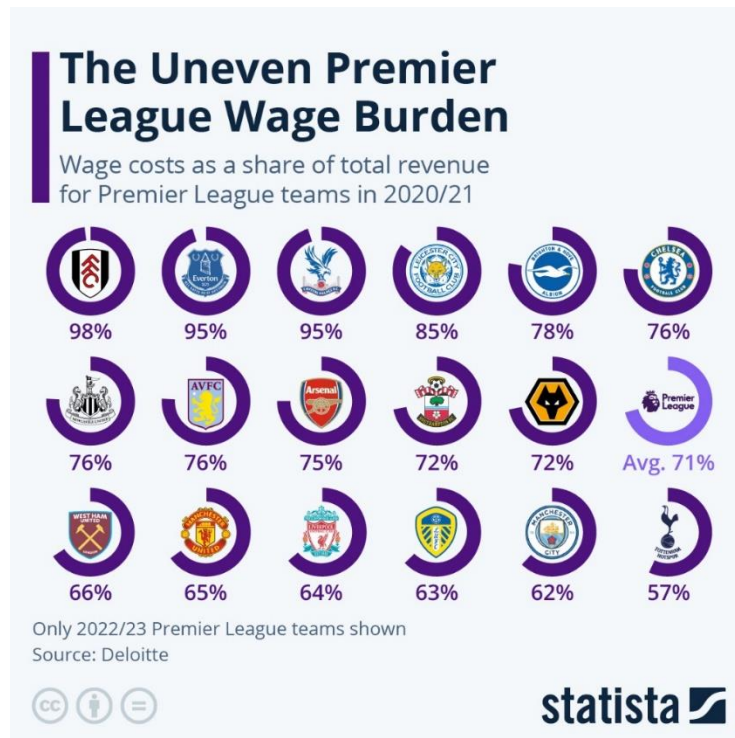


Figure 3 – Cost as share of total revenue for PL teams in 2020/21

Hamill and Walters²⁰ highlight that football clubs, despite their income levels, have accumulated significant debts that raise concerns about their viability as sustainable businesses. If the directors' objectives are to influence football in the present era, their focus

¹⁸ Pitt-Brooke, J. (2012). Players' wages eat up record slice of revenues at Premier League clubs. *Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/players-wages-eat-up-record-slice-of-revenues-at-premier-league-clubs-7804933.html>

¹⁹ Armstrong, M. (2022). "The Uneven Premier League Wage Burden". *Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/22002/premier-league-wage-burden/>

²⁰ Walters, G., & Hamill, S. (2010). Ownership and governance. *Managing football: An international perspective*, 17-36.

is often not on running football clubs as financially viable enterprises. In other words, elite English football clubs have accumulated unprecedented levels of debt despite achieving record revenues²¹. As a result, European clubs required additional capital to address the mounting debt. After having been the major contributors, western-based enterprises had to take a step back, especially after 2008's global recession. The industry therefore experienced increased contributions from resource-rich and newly industrializing countries in Asia, including Russia, China, India, and the Gulf States²²

2.4 A shift in football's economic center of gravity

Focusing on the English Premier League, the first foreign acquisition of a then-current Premier League club occurred when a consortium of Norwegian businessmen purchased Wimbledon in 1999. However, it was the takeover of Chelsea by Roman Abramovich in 2003 that marked a significant turning point, as foreign investment in English football began to increase substantially. The Abramovich takeover transformed Chelsea into a title-winning club, albeit running on a benefactor model that resulted in significant financial losses for both the club and the owner²³. This marked a period of substantial transformation in the ownership landscape of English football, with foreign investment becoming a common trend across various clubs of varying sizes and histories.

What made Abramovich's acquisition of Chelsea particularly noteworthy, nevertheless, was, in the words of former Newcastle owner Sir John Hall, the fact that “*(Abramovich) 's money changed the game [...] It changed the way football was being run. He could do anything*”²⁴. The game-changing aspect was not only the significant sums of money involved but also the source of Abramovich's wealth and the implications it carried. While Abramovich amassed his fortune from the oil industry, that was only part of the story. He also benefited from the

²¹ Millward, P. (2013). New football directors in the twenty-first century: profit and revenue in the English Premier League's transnational age. *Leisure Studies*, 32(4), 399-414.

²² Thani, S., & Heenan, T. (2017). The ball may be round but football is becoming increasingly Arabic: Oil money and the rise of the new football order. *Soccer & Society*, 18(7), 1012-1026.

²³ Jones, A., & Cook, M. (2015). The spillover effect from FDI in the English Premier League. *Soccer & Society*, 16(1), 116-139. DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2014.882819

²⁴ Kai, O. (2023). “Roman Abramovich, Chelsea and a takeover that made every club want a ‘messiah’ owner”. *The Athletic*. Available at: <https://theathletic.com/4651442/2023/07/01/roman-abramovich-chelsea-takeover-20-years-legacy/>

post-Soviet loans-for-shares privatization auction, where a select few individuals, including him, became astonishingly wealthy by capitalizing on formerly state-owned assets, at a time when many ordinary families were facing hardships and financial difficulties. This made him one of Russia's wealthiest individuals. It did not go unnoticed in the English football community. Tony Banks, the sports minister at the time, expressed his concerns, stating that “*We need to look at the source of his money, what his track record has been in Russia to establish whether he is a fit and proper person to take over a football club in this country*”²⁴. Russian investment in European football was not limited to Mr. Abramovich’s expenses in Chelsea. Between 2012 and 2022, Russian majority state-owned multinational energy corporation Gazprom established a sponsorship deal with FIFA. The deal was reportedly worth around 40 million euros per season, and it was called off following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine²⁵. An interesting aspect of this sponsorship deal is that, as an energy corporation, Gazprom offers nothing to ordinary consumers, including those that every Wednesday and Thursday evening saw the Gazprom logo before, during, and after each UEFA Champions League game. The return to such important investments, therefore, must lie outside of the little direct financial returns it promises.

Regardless of the suspicion that it was met with, Abramovich’s acquisition of Chelsea paved the way for what would become one of the most notable *leitmotifs* of modern football, the involvement of Arab investors in European football. An exhaustive account of all the instances of capital flows from the Arabian Peninsula to European football is beyond the scope of this research, nevertheless, it is interesting to point out a few cases to better understand the build-up to the pinnacle of this movement, namely the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar.

Involvement in the acquisition of top-end European clubs commenced in 2004, when Dubai’s Emirates Airways signed the biggest sponsorship deal ever seen with EPL giants, Arsenal. As part of the deal, the airline secured naming rights for Arsenal's recently built stadium until 2021 and gained international exposure through the global media reach of the EPL. Emirates quickly expanded its reach over European football, by securing deals with, among others, AC Milan in 2010, and Real Madrid in 2013. Abu Dhabi, on the other hand, would not remain a bystander for long. In 2008, Manchester City was acquired by Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Al

²⁵ Reuters (2022). “UEFA cancel Gazprom sponsorship deal”. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/uefa-cancel-gazprom-sponsorship-deal-source-2022-02-28/>

Nahyan from the embattled former Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Mansour, a member of the Abu Dhabi ruling family, is currently the UAE's Minister of Presidential Affairs and serves as the head of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA)²². Similarly, in 2011, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) obtained a controlling share in the prominent French club, PSG²⁶. QIA is under the control of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, a member of the Qatari royal family, who maintains a close association with Nasser Al-Khelaifi, the President of PSG. Within a year, QIA obtained full ownership of PSG, transforming it into one of the wealthiest football clubs globally. The owners of Manchester City and PSG have invested significant sums of money into their respective football clubs, leading to a financial turnaround and enabling them to acquire some of the finest players in the world. Gulf countries were also able to entice top football clubs to the region for international friendly matches. Notable visitors included AC Milan, Real Madrid, Manchester City, and Hamburg SV. These matches typically enjoy the patronage of the ruling families of the sheikhdoms and garner significant media attention globally. It would not be long, however, before official football matches would land in the Gulf peninsula as well.

The first major official global event of football's 'post-modern' era that was hosted in the Gulf peninsula was the 2009 FIFA Club World Cup, which took place in Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City Stadium²⁷. During the eight matches held in Abu Dhabi, a grand total of 133,724 spectators had the opportunity to witness high-level, international football matches. Notably, spectators were treated to a display of clubs from Oceania, Asia, Africa, and North and Central America, all fiercely competing with teams from Europe and South America for the title of FIFA Club World Cup champions in 2009.

More recently, Juventus and Milan clashed for the Italian 2018 *Supercoppa* final in Jeddah. Saudi Arabia would become the host of the following three editions of the final match of the competition, as Serie A had signed an agreement with the Saudi Ministry of Sports to hold

²⁶ Thani, S., & Heenan, T. (2016). The UAE, Qatar and the re-shaping of global football's boundaries. In *Sport, identity and community* (pp. 89-101). Brill.

²⁷ FIFA.com (2009). "FIFA Club World Cup UAE 2009™". Available at: <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/clubworldcup/uae2009>

three *Supercoppa* finals in Saudi Arabia over a five-year period in exchange for approximately 25 million dollars²⁸.

What had begun as an influx of capital from oil-rich countries towards European football in the early 2000s was now changing. After having funded first, and then acquired European clubs, funneling money into local clubs and competitions, countries like Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE were ready to start moving the geographic center of gravity of global football closer to them. What better instrument for these countries to step on the international stage and take a starring role than organizing a major international football tournament? And this is exactly what was going to happen. In 2009, FIFA began the selection process for the location of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. Australia, England, Netherlands/Belgium, Japan, Korea Republic, Qatar, Russia, Spain/Portugal, and the USA all presented for the penultimate stage of the bidding process²⁹. On December 2nd, 2010, the verdict was for Russia and Qatar to host football's biggest tournament, the FIFA World Cup, for the first time in 2018 and 2022 respectively. The news was met with jubilee by some and with disbelief by others.

2.5 The backlash

Moments after FIFA president Sepp Blatter announced the outcome of the executive committee vote in Zurich, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev expressed his joy on Twitter³⁰. The entire nation of Qatar burst into celebration as flag-waving Middle Easterners witnessed a football miracle, bringing the World Cup to the region for the first time in its history³¹. President Blatter said he was delighted football was going "to new lands". *"Never has the World Cup been in Russia and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and Arabic*

²⁸ Bellinazzo, M. (2023). "Supercoppa, ecco perché il derby Milan-Inter si gioca in Arabia Saudita". *Il Sole 24 Ore*. Available at: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/ecco-perche-derby-supercoppa-si-gioca-arabia-saudita-AEWP1bXC>

²⁹ FIFA.com (2010). "FIFA receives bidding documents for 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups". Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100729211034/http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/bidders/2018/newsid%3D1210979.html>

³⁰ Bolsover, C. (2010). "Off to Russia". *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-celebrates-its-selection-as-world-cup-2018-hosts/a-6290686>

³¹ Krug, M. (2010). "A World Cup miracle". *BBC News*. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/9252710.stm>

world have been waiting for a long time, so I'm a happy president when we talk about the development of football," said Blatter³⁰. On the other hand, the awarding encountered notable backlash. The majority of British newspapers claimed that the World Cup had been "sold" to Russia, while Spanish *El Mundo*, Dutch *Algemeen Dagblad*, and Japanese *Nikkei* discussed the financial power of Russia and Qatar, citing their commodity and energy reserves. American newspapers, including the *Seattle Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, alleged collusion and corruption in the bidding process³². The aftermath of the backlash and allegations of improprieties during the awarding of the hosting rights, together with other accusations, culminated in the resignation of Blatter from the presidency of FIFA in 2015 after 17 years.

With the start of the events approaching, investigations on malpractices in Russia and Qatar did not limit themselves to the awarding practices of the World Cup. Four years before the Russian World Cup kickoff, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. As the EU imposed a travel ban and frozen assets on Russian officials, FIFA encountered significant political pressure to reconsider its decision to hold the 2018 World Cup in Russia³³. Claims were also raised for Russia not only to be stripped of the World Cup but also banned from participating in it³⁴. Much attention was also directed toward social issues that Russia was facing, such as allegations of racial abuse³⁵ and discrimination against LGBT people in the country³⁶.

Similar accusations were directed to Qatar. Due to Islamic sharia law in Qatar, there are no LGBT rights, and both homosexuality and advocating for LGBT rights are considered criminal offenses. The safety of fans and the presence of homophobic football chants from

³² BBC News (2010). "English media angry at Fifa World Cup voting 'fix'". Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/9253692.stm>

³³ BBC (2014). "Fifa urged to rethink staging 2018 World Cup in Russia". Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-26679542>

³⁴ Winter, S. (2014). "US calls for Fifa to drop Russia from hosting World Cup in 2018". *Express*. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/466357/US-calls-for-Fifa-to-drop-Russia-from-hosting-World-Cup-in-2018>

³⁵ Saakov, R. (2014). "Russia 2018: Major challenges for next World Cup hosts". *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28409784>

³⁶ McCormick, J. (2014). "Campaigns demand FIFA bans Russia from hosting 2018 World Cup due to anti-gay law". *PinkNews*. Available at: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2014/03/25/campaigns-demand-fifa-relocates-2018-world-cup-russia-due-anti-gay-law/>

certain nations thus raised concerns³⁷. Moreover, a very important cause for concern, and reason for loud denunciations by many, was Qatar's longstanding abuse of migrant workers. Central to the abuse experienced by migrant workers is Qatar's 'Kafala' system of sponsorship-based employment, which legally ties foreign workers to their employers. This system historically restricted workers from changing jobs or exiting the country without their employer's consent, perpetuating a cycle of abuse among migrant workers. Other factors resulting in worker abuse include high levels of worker debt resulting from illegal and unethical recruitment practices, delays and non-payment of wages, obstacles in seeking justice when rights are violated, the prohibition of trade unions, and the lack of enforcement of labor laws and penalties for employers who exploit their workers³⁸. These blatant human rights violations did raise considerable concerns. In fact, a 2021 public opinion survey on whether the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar should be held in a different country worldwide showed that almost 70% of respondents were in favor of removing the tournament from Qatar (Figure 4)³⁹.

³⁷ Bearak, M., Cameron, D. (2016). "Here are the 10 countries where homosexuality may be punished by death". *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/here-are-the-10-countries-where-homosexuality-may-be-punished-by-death-2/>

³⁸ Amnesty International (2020). "REALITY CHECK: MIGRANT WORKERS RIGHTS WITH TWO YEARS TO QATAR 2022 WORLD CUP". Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/02/reality-check-migrant-workers-rights-with-two-years-to-qatar-2022-world-cup/>

³⁹ Statista (2023). Public opinion on whether the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar should be held in a different country worldwide as of April 2021 [chart]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1298753/global-public-opinion-qatar-world-cup-different-country/>

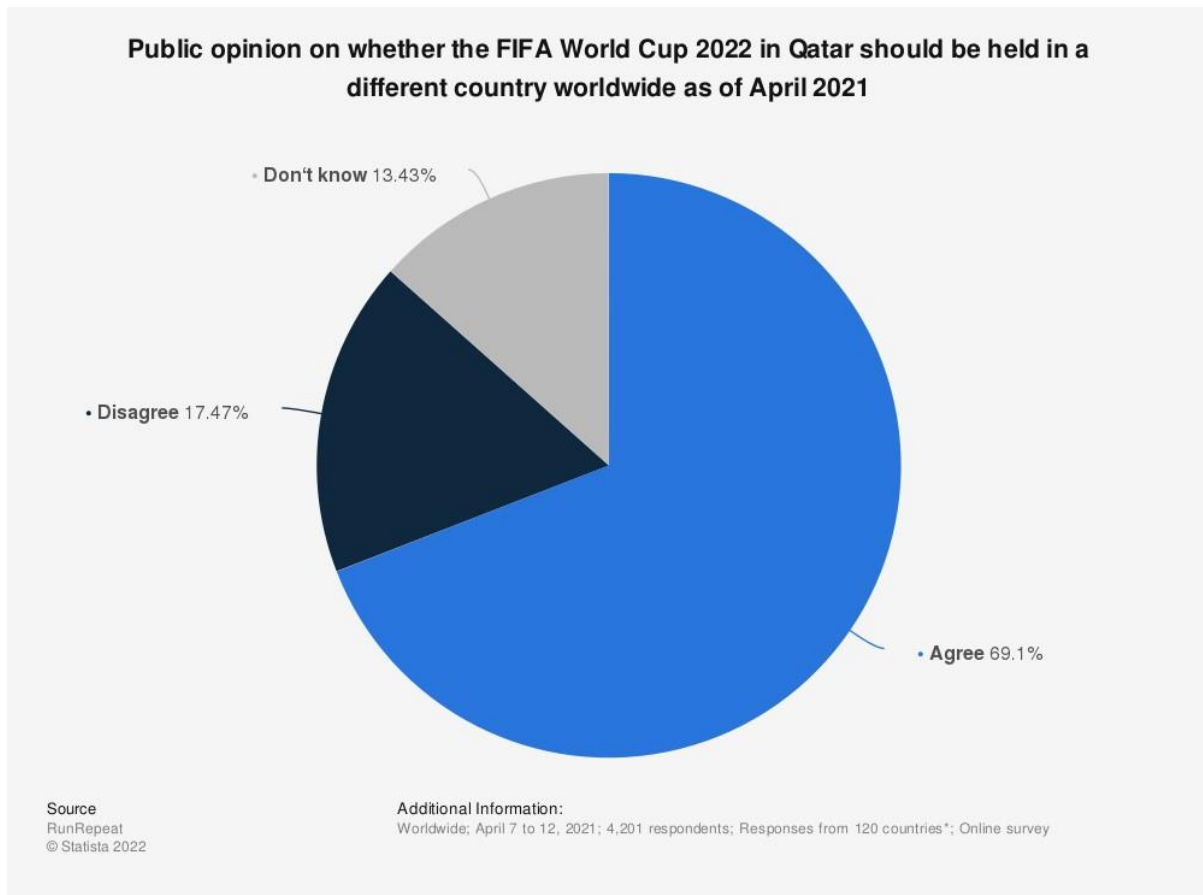


Figure 4 – Public opinion on FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar

It is no coincidence that such backlash involved two countries that present similarities in their political systems, namely displaying, to different degrees, authoritarian traits. Although constitutionally a democracy since 1993, Russia is categorized as a Consolidated Authoritarian regime in the Nations in Transit 2023, Freedom House's annual study on the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia⁴⁰. This is due to the suppression of civil society groups, resulting in minimal room for civil activism in the country. Furthermore, there is heightened discrimination against the LGBT community and ethnic minorities, pervasive wartime censorship, and the repression of independent media, bloggers, and journalists. The increasing centralization of power through the imposition of a state of emergency and military mobilization following the Crimean invasion further exacerbates the situation⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Zavadszkaya, M. (2023). Russia. *Freedom House*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2023>

Qatar, on the other hand, is a unitary authoritarian parliamentary semi-constitutional monarchy. All executive and legislative authority in the country is concentrated in the hands of the hereditary emir, who also exercises ultimate control over the judiciary. The absence of political parties is evident, and the only elections that take place are for an advisory municipal council. Despite Qatari citizens being among the wealthiest globally, a significant portion of the population comprises noncitizens who lack political rights, have limited civil liberties, and face restricted access to economic opportunities⁴¹. Both countries are categorized as Not Free in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index's annual report.

So long as these countries were financing football *in* Europe, whatever was happening within their borders did not necessarily attract the attention of mainstream media. Of course, eyebrows were raised, and eyes squinted with suspicion at the colossal influxes of money that were being injected into the game. This kind of attitude, nevertheless, was never an overt topic of conversation and never reached high levels of concern in public discourse. On the contrary, many football fans from teams lucky enough to receive the financial support of Russia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE praised their new benefactors as “*messiahs*”, and caused the jealousy of the fans of those teams that were not as fortunate. Harry Redknapp, an English former football manager and player, best summed up the situation during Tottenham Hotspur's pre-season tour of the United States in the summer of 2010. Manchester City, under Sheikh Mansour's ownership, was on the verge of replicating what Chelsea had achieved under Abramovich. “*Football fans don't care,*” he said. “*The players don't care. Saddam Hussein could own your football club and, if he's putting millions into it, they'll be quite happy. They'll be singing, 'There's only one Saddam'.*”²⁴.

Things rapidly started to change once these countries began to take a leading role in the organization of the tournaments themselves⁴². For a country, organizing an event like the World Cup means for the entire world to turn its eyes toward the political, economic, and social dynamics that characterize it. Often, especially as far as organizing a World Cup is a very disruptive and resource-consuming task for a country, these eyes are indeed looking for malpractices. This is notably the case if the country's government is, to a certain degree,

⁴¹ Freedom in the World 2023. Qatar. *Freedom House*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/qatar/freedom-world/2023>

⁴² Krzyzaniak, J. S. (2018). The soft power strategy of soccer sponsorships. *Soccer & Society*, 19(4), 498-515. DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2016.1199426

authoritarian. Moreover, as organization costs have skyrocketed over the last editions, hosting the World Cup is not a cost-effective endeavor (Figure 5)⁴³.

Hosting Nation	Cost of Hosting	Winners	Year
Italy	\$4 billion	Germany	1990
USA	\$500 million	Brazil	1994
France	\$2.33 billion	France	1998
Korea & Japan	\$7 billion	Brazil	2002
Germany	\$4.6 billion	Italy	2006
South Africa	\$3.6 billion	Spain	2010
Brazil	\$15 billion	Germany	2014
Russia	\$11.6 billion	France	2018
Qatar	\$220 billion	TBA	2022
TBA	TBA	TBA	TBA

Figure 5 – Cost of hosting FIFA World Cup from 1990 to 2022

The economic benefits of hosting the World Cup have become non-existent, at least in the short term⁴⁴. Italy 1990, for example, led to high indebtedness, affecting the economy decades later⁴⁵. Before Qatar 2022, the most expensive world cup ever to be organized was Brazil 2014. With a total of \$15 billion, the Brazilian World Cup not only was the most expensive World Cup, but it was also the most expensive single-sport mega-event ever⁴⁵. Just eight years later, a new record was set: almost 15 times as much money was spent for the organization of the tournament in Qatar. \$220 billion was invested over the span of 12 years in the construction of new roads, airports, neighborhoods, and even new cities. It is therefore

⁴³ Statista Research Department (2023). “Total cost of hosting the World Cup 1994-2022” [chart]. *Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1361481/world-cup-host-total-costs/>

⁴⁴ Bronwnsell, J. (2022). “Do host countries make money from the World Cup?”. *Aljazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2022/11/17/do-host-countries-make-money-from-the-world-cup>

⁴⁵ Fett, M. (2020). The game has changed—a systematic approach to classify FIFA World Cups. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 12(3), 455-470.

premature to draw a conclusion on the profitability of the event in the long run. It is important to note, however, that Qatar is the smallest country to host the World Cup since Switzerland in 1954⁴⁶, finding itself with a surplus of very expensive stadiums on its hands. According to Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, some of the stadiums will undergo dismantling and recycling, while others will be downsized. Additionally, some of the stadiums will be repurposed into residential and commercial areas, serving as shopping destinations⁴⁶. In other words, expenses are not quite over yet. The cost ineffectiveness of a World Cup is also made more evident if we consider the benefits that sports sponsorships bring, with much lower levels of investment. The aforementioned deals between Emirates and European football teams resulted in a significant growth of the airline's business. In 2004, the Emirates transported 19 million passengers to 73 destinations, yielding a net profit of \$US476 million. Nine years later, the number of passengers surged to 39 million as the airline expanded its services to 161 destinations, resulting in a net profit of \$US845 million. In light of these considerations, it is legitimate to question why a state, an authoritarian state in particular, would decide to host the FIFA World Cup. With no promise of financial return (at least in the short run), and the threat of attracting the wrong kind of attention to the country's government, economy, or society, it is necessary to borrow a few concepts from political science in order to better understand the rationale that might stand behind a project like the organization the FIFA World Cup.

2.6 Nation Branding & Soft Power

The first concept that can help us shed some light on the question motivating this research is the concept of nation branding. Nation branding involves the application of branding and marketing communication strategies to promote and enhance a nation's image. States function as brands in order to thrive within an intensely competitive environment, where entities, individuals, and even nations define themselves by more than just their specific products or services. As a result, they cultivate distinctive identities to secure a place in the spotlight and capture attention. People's attitudes towards states are not to be expected to be any different to the attitude they have towards companies. When assessing nations, people do not

⁴⁶ Baker, A. (2022). "Here's What Will Happen to Qatar's Billion Dollar Stadiums Now That the World Cup Is Over". *Time*. Available at: <https://time.com/6242292/what-happens-to-qatar-world-cup-stadiums/>

necessarily engage in rational evaluations but, instead, often form judgments driven by their emotions⁴⁷. Despite the growing relevance of the topic and the increasing interest of scholars, there is no single definition of nation branding as the field is still developing. For the sake of this research, the semantic sphere of nation branding that shall be considered stems from one of the research themes identified by Hao et al.⁴⁸ in the existing literature, namely a country's image and reputation. To create an appealing brand, a country must strategically manage its image and reputation; its image is multifaceted and may carry both factual and affective information. People thus form rational and emotional judgments about various aspects of a country based on their perceptions of it. Its reputation is shaped by individuals' personal experiences, as well as the information they receive⁴⁹. Hao et al. identify five main reasons why it is useful for countries to manage their images: first, to foster a positive image and promote the country overall; second, to attract tourists; third, to enhance the value of domestically produced goods; fourth, to lure foreign investment; and fifth, to attract talented residents.

If we take the example of Qatar 2022, just by limiting ourselves to the first reason we can understand at least part of the country's strategy in organizing the World Cup. Qatar is associated with the colonial grand narratives prevalent in Western culture, which perpetuate the stereotype of Arabs as the 'Other.' This stereotype portrays them as uncivilized, non-Christian, exotic, and inferior, standing in stark contrast to the values and ideas of the West⁵⁰. According to Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee⁵¹, hosting the World Cup was planned as a 'performative political practice' for Qatar. This practice aimed to project a meticulously crafted international image of an open-minded, modern society that is both Muslim and Arab. The objective was to attract other countries by displaying this image during the event.

⁴⁷ Van Ham, P. (2001). The rise of the brand state: The postmodern politics of image and reputation. *Foreign affairs*, 2-6. DOI: 10.2307/20050245

⁴⁸ Hao, A. W., Paul, J., Trott, S., Guo, C., Wu, H. W. (2019). Two decades of research on nation branding: a review and future research agenda. *International Marketing Review*, 38(1) ISSN: 0265-1335

⁴⁹ Kang, M., & Yang, S. U. (2010). Comparing effects of country reputation and the overall corporate reputations of a country on international consumers' product attitudes and purchase intentions. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 13, 52-62.

⁵⁰ Griffin, T. R. (2021). National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022 the cultural ramifications of FIFA's first Arab World Cup. In *Moments, Metaphors, Memories*, 1st Edition, Routledge. ISBN9781003142546

⁵¹ Grix, J., Lee, D. (2013). Soft Power, Sports Mega-events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521-536. DOI: 10.1080/13600826.2013.827632.

The perception of a nation's brand can be managed and shaped through what Joseph Nye has defined as soft power⁵². It refers to a country's ability to influence others and shape their behavior through attraction, persuasion, and cultural appeal, rather than through coercion or force. Unlike hard power, which involves the use of military force or economic sanctions to achieve goals, soft power operates through non-coercive means. It leverages a country's cultural exports, educational opportunities, values, and diplomatic outreach to create positive perceptions and build partnerships with other nations. The aim of soft power is to enhance a country's standing, credibility, and influence in international affairs, ultimately advancing its interests and objectives without resorting to military or economic dominance. The country can direct its soft power strategy both internally, to foster a sense of national pride and belonging, and externally, to communicate the achievements of the country to the international community. Sports fall within the tools that enable states to exert soft power. Political scientists have widely recognized sports as a significant contributor to a state's 'brand' or 'image' due to its capacity for nation-building. It instills a sense of domestic pride through the accomplishments of national teams, and projects a distinct identity on the international platform, appealing to others⁵³.

Instances of sports, football especially, being used to forward a state's soft power strategy fill up political history books. Germany, for example, was able, in 2006, to use the World Cup as a public diplomacy tool to improve the generally negative external image of the country. Germany faced an image challenge on the international stage. The historical legacy of the Third Reich, the brutality of the Nazis, and the aggressive actions during the early 20th century has left a lasting impact not only on the psyche of Germans but also on the perceptions of their global partners⁵⁴. In 2006, there was an unexpected display of sports patriotism that diverged from the past perceptions of national sentiments in Germany. Although defining and quantifying the impact of soft power can be challenging, concrete data pinpoints the success of the German 2006 FIFA World Cup. Notably, tourism, along with other industries such as airlines, food, film, and media, benefited significantly from the event.

⁵² Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign policy*, (80), 153-171.

⁵³ Grix, J., Houlihan, B. (2014). Sports Mega-Events as Part of a Nation's Soft Power Strategy: The Cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012): Sports Mega-Events. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 16(4), 572-96. DOI:10.1111/1467-856X.12017

⁵⁴ Grix, J., & Lacroix, C. (2006). Constructing Germany's image in the British press: An empirical analysis of stereotypical reporting on Germany. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 14(3), 373-392.

The combination of sustained government investment and meticulously orchestrated campaigns to optimize the World Cup's influence led to a notable improvement in Germany's international perception compared to the period preceding the SME⁵³. The New York Times cleverly summed up public sentiment towards post-2006 Germany by stating that the "... *preconceptions about Germany—its dullness, its love of order, its formality, its lack of exuberance—were perhaps the biggest casualties of a tournament played in a festive spirit, and marked by freewheeling generosity and the fruition of an often-painful German search for a patriotism at once natural and unthreatening*"⁵⁵.

The conjugation of the relationship between sports, especially football, and politics that most interests the current study, however, arises when the host country is an authoritarian state. The phenomenon can be traced back to at least the 1934 World Cup in fascist Italy under Mussolini's rule and the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany under Hitler's regime. Ironically, the very same tool that was used to promote the Nazi regime was later used again by Germany to salvage that tarnished reputation. It continues through the years, evident in events like the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, which took place just two years after a brutal military dictatorship established itself in the country⁴. In the context of the Cold War, sporting victories were regarded as demonstrations of the superiority of the political system that nurtured the athletes, aimed at garnering support for either communism or capitalism on a global scale. In the USSR, the emphasis on success was so profound that "*Soviet sportsmen were not allowed to participate in international competitions unless they had reasonable prospects of winning.*"⁵⁶. Post-Soviet Kazakh government also sought to challenge the stereotypes associated with the country, namely comprised of steppes, yurts, the Aral Sea disaster, and Borat⁵⁷. They have done so through the Astana brand, in particular thanks to the Astana Pro cycling team. Fauve claims that the Astana Pro Team literally embodies the country. The Kazakhstani state-sponsored professional cycling team has achieved significant international results, with Vinokurov, one of the most popular celebrities in the country and in

⁵⁵ Cohen, R. (2006). "Without a Team in the Final, Germany Achieves a Victory". *The New York Times*. Available at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A04E3D81030F93AA35754C0A9609C8B63&pagewanted=all>

⁵⁶ Koch, N. (2013). Sport and soft authoritarian nation-building. *Political geography*, 32, 42-51. ISSN 0962-6298

⁵⁷ Fauve, A. (2015). Global Astana: Nation branding as a legitimization tool for authoritarian regimes. *Central Asian Survey*, 34(1), 110–124. DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2015.1016799

the (cycling) world, captaining the team towards remarkable success. During races, Fauve would observe international fans painting their bodies in blue and yellow, as on the team shirt, in support of Vinokurov and the Astana team. This perfectly illustrates what the author defines as a 'performative mode of occultation,' where Kazakhstan is portrayed as a nation without any reference to its political rule. These fans, despite not being Kazakhstani citizens, openly expressed their support for their favorite team by painting their bodies in tribute to the country's flag. This subconscious connection between the Astana Pro Team and the promotion of independent Kazakhstan suggests a link that transcends national boundaries and reaches a global audience⁵⁷.

Going back to Qatar's image management efforts, according to Brannagan and Giulianotti⁵⁸ its sports engagement, primarily aimed at promoting the nation, is focused on three foremost themes: health and well-being; progress and modernization; and peace and security. Qatar ranks among the countries with the highest rates of obesity globally among adults and male youth. The leadership considers sport as an ideal investment to improve the nation's health. However, there is reason to approach the state's success with caution, as there is little evidence supporting a connection between hosting SMEs and higher levels of sports participation. The drive for 'progress and modernization' aims to challenge specific negative 'orientalist' perceptions about Qatar and the broader 'East' on the global stage. Traditional orientalist stereotypes rooted in Western perspectives have often depicted Arab communities as irrational, indolent, and devoid of responsibility⁵⁹. Thus, Qatar views successful involvement and leadership in global sports as a strategic means to foster a more accurate understanding of Arab and Eastern cultures. In a broader context, sports possess the capacity to counter adverse portrayals by projecting the nation as forward-thinking, innovative, and empathetic. This aspiration to be perceived as considerate towards others often leads to reciprocal responses, as the international community may reciprocate through cooperation and support. Finally, a primary objective in securing the 2022 finals was to engage with the sizable portion of Westerners who possess limited knowledge about the Persian Gulf region. This notably involves those who struggle to distinguish between places like Gaza or Baghdad and Doha or Abu Dhabi. Employing a soft power strategy, the Qatari authorities intend to

⁵⁸ Brannagan, P. M., Giulianotti, R. (2014). Qatar, Global Sport and the 2022 FIFA World Cup. *Leveraging Legacies from Sports Mega- Events: Concepts and Cases*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 154 - 165.

⁵⁹ Amara, M. (2013). 2006 Qatar Asian Games: A 'Modernization' Project from Above?. In *Sport, Nationalism and Orientalism*, (pp. 89-110). Routledge.

utilize global sports to depict the nation as dedicated to principles of peace and shared values, in what Fauve could define as an instance of a 'performative mode of occultation'. By associating Qatar with notions of tranquility, safety, and security awareness, they effectively contribute to a broader aim: fostering the growth of a robust tourism industry⁵⁸, whilst diverting attention from other, less attractive to tourists, features of the country. Nevertheless, as previously pointed out, all that glitters is not gold. Especially when the glitter comes from an authoritarian state.

2.7 Soft Disempowerment & Sportswashing

Where there is a search for soft power, there is an inherent potential for soft disempowerment, as nations can inadvertently disrupt, offend, or isolate other countries, consequently diminishing their appeal and influence⁶⁰. The previous description of the backlash associated with the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar provides a clear example. The notion of soft disempowerment emphasizes the need to move beyond the mere accumulation of positive soft power. Instead, this concept points the finger toward the need to analyze how social actions can lead to both empowering and disempowering outcomes, encompassing both positive and negative effects. Bringing to the table a further example of unwanted or unforeseen consequences of striving for soft power, the Beijing 2008 Olympics also thrust China into a significant spotlight, drawing attention to issues like the Tibet occupation, treatment of minorities such as the Uyghurs, environmental pollution, human rights, and democratic concerns. This potential for adverse publicity and decreased attractiveness can result in host nations suffering more than they can gain in terms of their perceived image⁶¹.

Contrary to Qatar's intentions of soft power, instances of soft disempowerment through global sports have shed light on occasions when Qatar displayed a lack of integrity, unfair practices, discriminatory behavior, unwelcoming attitudes, and an absence of accountability.

Consequently, this has raised substantial inquiries not only about Qatar's capability and legitimacy to host the 2022 World Cup but, more importantly, generated apprehensions and

⁶⁰ Brannagan, P. M., Giulianotti, R. (2018). Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and Football's 2022. World Cup Finals. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 703-719. DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2014.964291

⁶¹ Chalip, L., (2005). Marketing, media, and place promotion. In J. Higham. (Ed.), *Sport tourism destinations: Issues, opportunities and analysis*, Oxford: Elsevier

uncertainties regarding the nation's preparedness to become a full participant in the global community⁶⁰.

A term that can increasingly be found in papers and news headlines, and that demonstrates the dynamics proper to soft disempowerment in the realm of sports, is sportswashing. Sportswashing exemplifies a form of soft disempowerment by manipulating the positive aspects of sports to overshadow and deflect attention from more substantial concerns, ultimately allowing those in power to maintain their grip on authority while projecting an image of reform and progress. The core interaction here revolves around a knowable moral violation, juxtaposed with the intention to diminish the attention it garners, whether compared to its current level, anticipated level, or rightful level. Sportswashing operates by diverting focus away from this moral breach, employing sports as the conduit. Given sports' immense ability to captivate and its substantial audience, especially in Europe as previously illustrated, it has evolved into a strategic tool for negotiating this fundamental interplay between a moral breach and the inclination to evade external scrutiny⁴. The way sportswashing aims to tackle a moral transgression essentially revolves around engaging an audience. Consequently, it is frequently perceived that sportswashing primarily revolves around reputational consequences, serving as a re-branding endeavor to dissociate from unfavorable associations. An allegation of sportswashing commonly suggests an entity involved in misconduct attempting to address it, not through implementing corrective measures to alleviate the wrongdoing, but by manipulating how it is perceived by external parties. In this process, the entity indirectly implicates these external parties in the wrongdoing.

As described in section 2.2, sports clubs and events are linked with a powerful spectrum of favorable emotions and establish identity-related allegiances among countless enthusiasts. When these affiliations coincide with the owner of a beloved club or the organizer of a cherished event, sportswashing has the potential to magnify what could be described as an extensive halo effect⁴, a positive spillover of those favorable emotions towards the owners or organizers. Sports and sporting events frequently serve as a means to establish and characterize a specific form of community, as is the case with European identity and football. Through involvement in sports, those who employ sportswashing aim to attain recognition and prestige as a significant and positive contributor within a specific sporting community. Consequently, it also anticipates leveraging induced tribalism, a situation where the *sportswasher* would be shielded, pardoned, and legitimized by the sporting community as a valued insider, particularly when faced with critiques from those seen as external to that

community. During a moment of applause in solidarity with Ukraine, for example, Chelsea Football Club fans chanted the name of their Russian oligarch owner⁶². Today, Harry Redknapp's words do not sound so hyperbolic after all.

Similarly, it is conceivable that Qatar's participation in global football might serve as a means, firstly, of distracting attention from the stark inequalities present within Qatari society, effectively pushing crucial information to the periphery. Secondly, the prominence of Qatar's involvement in beloved sporting events and institutions might potentially minimize the moral transgressions connected to such inequalities, particularly in the eyes of an extensive audience. Lastly, as Qatar progressively integrates into the global football community, it may understandably aspire to be perceived solely as a sovereign nation with some minor shortcomings in its domestic affairs, shielded from external criticism⁴. Countries like Saudi Arabia⁶³, and China at some point⁶⁴, were reportedly interested in hosting future editions of the World Cup. Sharing governmental similarities with the already mentioned autocratic governments that have won the awarding of the competition, we can expect these dynamics to arise again. We can thus delineate the research gap addressed by this work.

2.8 The Research Gap

Having outlined the dynamics that have brought to the current situation that this research aims to investigate, it is also important to understand why this research is relevant and where it places itself among the existing literature.

The decision to limit the investigation into the effectiveness of organizing an international football competition on the improvement of the perception of a country to authoritarian regimes is twofold. First, and most obviously, authoritarian regimes are in stark opposition to

⁶² Descalsota, M. (2022). "Chelsea fans chanted Russian oligarch and owner Roman Abramovich's name during a soccer game, interrupting applause for Ukraine". *Insider*. Available at: <https://www.insider.com/chelsea-fans-chant-roman-abramovich-interrupt-applause-for-ukraine-2022-3#:~:text=Chelsea%20fans%20chanted%20Russian%20oligarch,game%2C%20interrupting%20applause%20for%20Ukraine&text=Chelsea%20Football%20Club%20fans%20chanted,a%20game%20on%20March%205>.

⁶³ Agence France Press (2023). "Asian Federation Foresees Saudi Bid For 2030 Or 2034 World Cup". *Barron's*. Available at: <https://www.barrons.com/news/asian-federation-foresees-saudi-bid-for-2030-or-2034-world-cup-fef0551>

⁶⁴ Church, M. (2022). "Fifa World Cup: notion of China hosting in 2030 fades from the conversation". *South China Morning Post*. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/sport/china/article/3203648/fifa-world-cup-notion-china-hosting-2030-fades-conversation>

the core tenets of the European multilateral order⁶⁵. Article 1 of the UN charter invokes “respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples”⁶⁶. For autocrats, nevertheless, states are sovereign, not people. A deep dive into the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine goes beyond the scope of this research, although its economic and social consequences are quite evident to most.

Secondly, scholars have been observing a global expansion of authoritarian rule.

Authoritarian governments have become more effective at assimilating or bypassing the norms and institutions designed to uphold fundamental freedoms. The current challenge to democracy has arisen due to a continuous decline in global freedom for 16 consecutive years. In the past year, a total of 60 nations experienced decreases in their levels of freedom, while only 25 showed improvements. Presently, approximately 38 percent of the global population resides in countries categorized as "Not Free," marking the highest proportion since 1997². Leaders from nations like China and Russia, which have autocratic regimes, have effectively altered global motivations. They have undermined the widely accepted belief that democracy is the sole route to prosperity and security. This has encouraged the adoption of authoritarian methods of governance. Over the last 15 years, autocrats have leveraged their own political and economic power and benefited from reduced pressure exerted by democracies, thus creating a more advantageous international context for their rule.

This brings us to the first hypothesis that this paper aims to investigate, namely whether European citizens perceive a better image of a democratic state compared to an autocratic one (H1).

As the expected outcome is for countries run by democracies to be perceived better than autocratic countries by European citizens, we can introduce the second, more interesting, contribution of this research.

As authoritarian states have increasingly sought to gain more power in international football, scholars have tried to account for and analyze this trend in recent years^{12, 17, 42, 58, 60}. García & Amara¹⁷, for example, aim to ascertain the perception of recent Arab investment in European

⁶⁵ Borrell, J. (2022). “Why we must resist when authoritarian regimes try to re-define international rules”. *European Union EXTERNAL ACTION*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-we-must-resist-when-authoritarian-regimes-try-re-define-international-rules_en

⁶⁶ United Nations Charter, Chapter I: Purposes and Principles (Articles 1-2). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-1>

football markets, exploring the cases of Malaga and Paris Saint Germain. They do so, however, by employing a qualitative methodology through thematic analysis of selected media publications in the French and Spanish press. The empirical and quantitative approach adopted in this research, thus, entails a novel approach to an issue that is gaining increasing attention in the literature.

Brannagan & Giulianotti⁶⁰, on the other hand, having underlined the counterbalancing effects of soft power and soft disempowerment proper to the organization of a World Cup in a country with an authoritarian regime, have set the ground for an empirical investigation on which of these effects is more prominent. Similarly, Michael Skey calls for “*better ways of evaluating the impact (or otherwise) of sportswashing*” and posits the “*need to actively investigate who supports and who resists, through what means and channels and to what ends*”¹². Finally, in his work on soft power and soccer sponsorship, Krzyzaniak points out how sticking to sponsorships is a much more effective tool for achieving soft power than organizing the World Cup⁴². Having observed how recent efforts concerning autocratic countries go against this view warrants the existence of a gap that scholars are yet to explore. Finally, most studies that have addressed the issue of government perception following the organization of a major international football tournament have done so focusing on public perception within the country^{4, 57}. The aim of this research is not to assess the effectiveness of a government in organizing an event like the World Cup to foster a national identity or to gain consensus among its citizens. On the contrary, it aims at understanding the sentiment that is associated with that country from an outsider’s perspective.

Therefore, we can frame the second hypothesis of this research as follows: the image that European citizens perceive of an autocratic country is improved when said country has organized a major international football competition (H2).

In conclusion, a distinction that previous literature has overlooked is that of the different effects that an authoritarian state’s involvement in sports might have on football fans rather than people uninterested in football. Although football is the most popular sport in the world, counting over 3.5 billion fans⁶⁷, it would be reductive to assume that the aims of the country investing billions in organizing an event like the football World Cup would expect the effects to limit themselves to football fans. From the moment they are awarded by the relative

⁶⁷ Veroutsos, E. (2022). “The Most Popular Sports In The World”. *WorldAtlas*. Available at: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-most-popular-sports-in-the-world.html>

governing body, and increasingly as the start of the competition approaches, SMEs fill up newspaper articles, enjoy extensive TV coverage, and become trending topics on social media. It would be safe to say that remaining unaware of the occurrence of an SME is a difficult and unlikely circumstance. On the other hand, it is also true that where a football fan can dig deep into the scrutiny and examination of the awarding, organization, and development of an international football competition, someone who does not care about football may limit themselves to a superficial understanding of the event. A lower involvement in the SME, however, does not warrant a less significant prominence of the cause-effect relationship investigated in this research. Where a football fan can be skewed away from critical considerations concerning the event or be biased in their judgment because of their emotional engagement with football, a non-football fan can limit their understanding and evaluation of the competition to a couple of headlines in the paper. The final research question that we will address in this work, consequently, is whether the effect of organizing an international football competition differs when the respondent identifies as a football fan (H3).

3) THE RESEARCH

3.1 Aim of the study & research questions

Given the relevance of the topic and the political, economic, and social ramifications that we have delineated so far, the main aim of the study will be to understand whether an autocratic country can improve the image European citizens perceive of it through the organization of an international football competition.

For this purpose, we have conducted a quantitative research study. Four experimental conditions have been created to investigate the marginal effect of the manipulation, as displayed in Table 1.

DEMOCRATIC STATE	AUTHORITARIAN STATE
DEMOCRATIC STATE ORGANIZING TOURNAMENT	AUTHORITARIAN STATE ORGANIZING TOURNAMENT

Table 1

Details concerning the definition and description of the four different conditions will be dealt with in the next section.

The research consists of a 2x2, between-subject, quantitative experimental study. A survey randomly displaying one of the four proposed stimuli was administered through the Qualtrics platform to a convenience sample. The survey was distributed between July and August 2023. The between-subject design was selected to implement a difference analysis between groups of participants who viewed different stimuli.

Two reasons explain limiting the distribution of the survey to European citizens only. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, the availability of the respondents. The survey has been distributed to easily accessible people via social media (i.e., Instagram and WhatsApp), whilst selecting the list of recipients to subjects from Europe. The second reason is the special relationship that Europe holds with football, as delineated in *section 1.3*. Having shown how football influences and, to some extent, shapes European identity, and vice versa, the expectation is for the relationship object of this research to be more prominent and significant when considering the impact that it has on European citizens. Although we cannot say with certainty that the aims of an authoritarian state organizing an international football tournament like the World Cup are to direct its soft power towards European spectators and fans especially, we can nevertheless expect this effect to be more prominent on that very demographic. That is, in the light of the previously presented literature, if organizing the World Cup were to yield a significant effect on the general population, such effect would be most identifiable when the population in question is culturally tied to football in the first place, as it has previously been shown to be the case for the European population.

The conceptual model will be structured as follows. The first step necessary to lay the groundwork for the main study is to assess the relationship between the type of government that characterizes a country, namely democratic or autocratic, and the image of that country that is perceived by the respondent. The expected result is for the respondent to better perceive the image of a democratic state than the image of an authoritarian state. Hence:

- **H1:** European citizens perceive a better image of a democratic state compared to an authoritarian state.

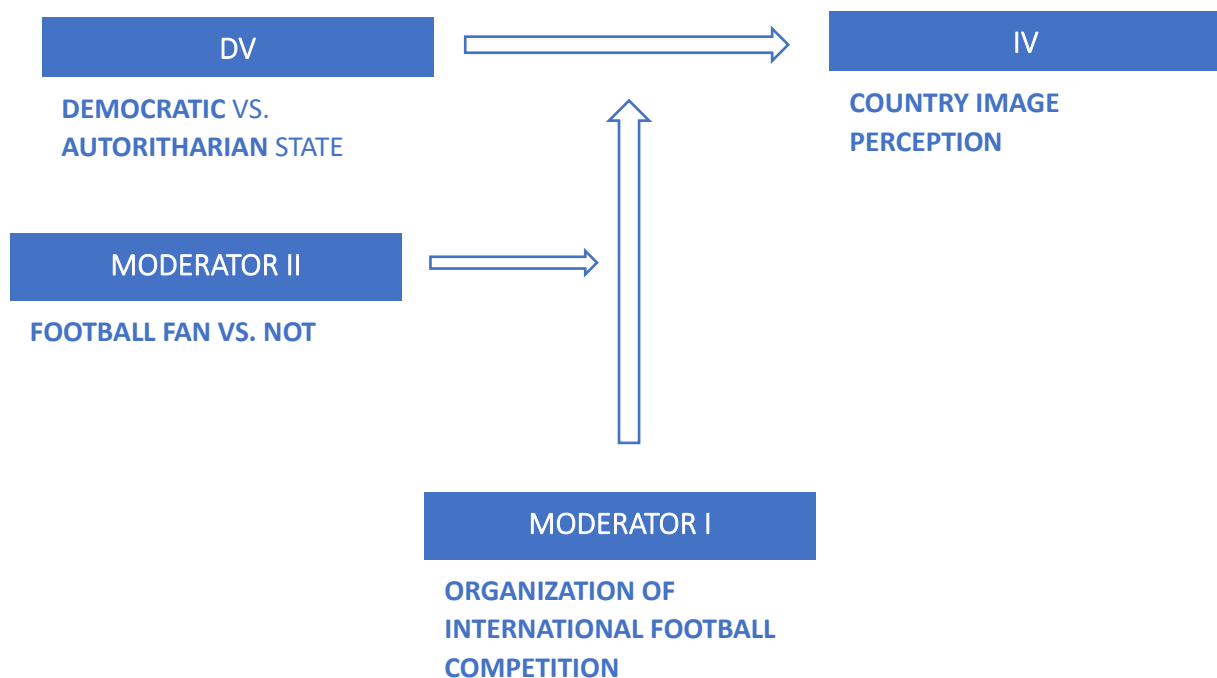
Having evaluated the first hypothesis of this research, we can proceed to investigate whether a significant moderation effect can be identified. The moderator at issue is, of course, the organization of an international football competition such as the FIFA World Cup. The second hypothesis has thus been formulated:

- **H2:** European citizens perceive a better image of an authoritarian state that organizes an international football competition rather than an authoritarian state that does not organize an international football competition.

The final effect that we have investigated in this study is the marginal effect that identifying as a football fan may have on the findings of H2. This second moderation analysis was included to control for the possible confounding variable which is football fandom. Namely, were H3 to be confirmed, the association between the dependent and independent variables in H2 would be affected by a variable that alters the results of the study by limiting the scope of its potential findings.

Therefore, the stratification of the data in the two groups, football fan vs. not, allows us to understand whether the dynamics that are explored in H2 are proper to the general European population or whether they are only applicable to a smaller subset. We have stated the last hypothesis comprising the research model as follows:

- **H3:** The effect investigated in H2 is significantly different when a respondent identifies as a football fan compared to when a respondent does not identify as a football fan.



3.2 The Experiment

One among the four different cases was presented to every respondent, each consisting of the description of a fictitious country. Different respondents answered the same questions concerning different scenarios, each introduced at the beginning of the survey. The occurrence of the scenario was randomized and uniformly presented so that each condition achieved roughly the same number of responses and every respondent was equally likely to encounter each one of the scenarios. First, the respondents encountered a brief introduction and assurance of the anonymity of their responses. Then, instructions on how the survey was organized were provided. One of two different instructions was presented, depending on which case (with the organization of the tournament or without) was going to come up, so the respondent already knew what to expect before being presented with the description of the scenario.

The cases presented were the following:

- **Case 1a** → *description of fictitious authoritarian state*

Country Y is a unitary authoritarian parliamentary semi-constitutional monarchy with a population of 35,95 million. Its GDP per capita is US\$ 29,922 (#38 in the world, 2023).

Country X is categorized as Not Free in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index's annual report. The index assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world. *Country X* has a Power Distance Index (PDI) of 80. The PDI refers to the degree of inequality that exists between people with and without power. The index can take on a value between 1 and 120; high values indicate that a society accepts an unequal, hierarchical distribution of power. In 2022, *Country Y* counted 16.6 million tourists (12th most visited country in the world).

- **Case 1b** → *description of fictitious authoritarian state + info on organization of international football tournament*

... *Country Y* was selected to host the latest edition of one of the most popular international football competitions in the world. It registered a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators from all over the world, and it is estimated that as much as \$220 billion has been spent since being chosen to host the competition.

- **Case 2a** → *description of democratic western state*

Country X is a federal parliamentary republic with a population of 84.2 million. Its GDP per capita is US\$ 51,383 (#19 in the world, 2023). *Country X* is categorized as Free in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index's annual report. The index assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world. *Country X* has a Power Distance Index (PDI) of 35. The PDI refers to the degree of inequality that exists between people with and without power. The index can take on a value between 1 and 120; high values indicate that a society accepts an unequal, hierarchical distribution of power. In 2022, *Country X* counted 28.5 million tourists (8th most visited country in the world).

- **Case 2b** → *description of democratic western state + info on organization of international football event*

... *Country X* was selected to host the latest edition of one of the most popular international football competitions in the world. It registered a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators from all over the world, and it is estimated that as much as \$7.8 billion has been for the arrangement of the competition.

The data for the characterization of the authoritarian state (*Country Y*) concerns Saudi Arabia, while the data that describes the international football competition concerns the 2022 Qatar World Cup. Regarding the democratic state (*Country X*), the data used to characterize it refers to Germany, and the data describing the international football competition relates to the 2006 Germany World Cup.

The metrics that have been selected for characterizing the fictitious countries are the countries' governments, their population, their GDP per capita, their Freedom in the World Index, their Power Distance Index, and the number of tourists having visited the countries during the previous year.

Government type was the first information provided to the respondent as it characterizes the manipulation of the study's main goal. It has been deemed necessary to immediately provide the respondent with the focal piece of information about the fictitious country they are to later make a judgment on.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is a metric that gives information about living standards within a country⁶⁸. It is useful to introduce to the respondent information about the state of the country's economy as far as it can exclude concerns about the financial sustainability of organizing an SME. Doubts on whether the fictitious country is financially able to organize the event could externally influence the evaluation of a county's image.

The Power Distance Index (PDI) measures the extent to which members of a society accept and expect power and hierarchical differences within their social and organizational structures. In societies with a high PDI, individuals tend to accept and respect authority figures, adhere to hierarchical structures, and exhibit deference to those in positions of power. These societies may emphasize status, social roles, and formal authority⁶⁹. We have used it as a proxy for the identification of authoritarian traits in the country that is described. It is important to note that, while a higher PDI may reflect a cultural inclination toward hierarchical power structures, it does not solely determine the presence or absence of authoritarian governance.

The Freedom in the World Index evaluates countries based on a set of indicators and assigns scores to measure the degree of political freedom and respect for civil liberties. The indicators include a range of factors such as electoral processes, political pluralism, freedom of expression and association, the functioning of the judiciary, and the presence of censorship or state control over the media. Countries are assigned scores on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 represents the least amount of political freedom and respect for civil liberties, and 100 represents the highest. Based on these scores, countries are categorized into three groups:

- *Free*: Countries with a high level of political rights and civil liberties. These countries generally have open political competition, respect for human rights, and robust democratic institutions.
- *Partly Free*: Countries in this category have some level of political rights and civil liberties, but significant restrictions or limitations exist. These countries may have issues such as limited political pluralism, constraints on freedom of expression, or biased electoral processes.

⁶⁸ Bondarenko, P. (2023). Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [definition]. *Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/gross-domestic-product>

⁶⁹ COUNTRY COMPARISON TOOL. Hofstede Insights. Available at: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool>

- *Not Free*: Countries in this category have severe restrictions on political rights and civil liberties. They often have authoritarian regimes, lack political pluralism, and frequently engage in human rights abuses.

As for the PDI, the Freedom in the World Index has been used to further characterize the fictitious country’s government as authoritarian or democratic.

International tourist arrivals track the number of international visitors entering a country. We have included this metric in the characterization of the fictitious country as it provides an overview of the country's attractiveness as a destination. It is contained in the description of the country as it provides useful information to ground the respondents’ perception of the Country’s international appeal.

3.3 The scales

After the introductory and descriptive sections of the survey, the respondents were presented with the statements in *table 5*. Respondents were asked to answer how much they agreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree). The scale is meant to measure the perception that the respondents have of the image of that country (*Box 1*).

<i>Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)</i>
<p>Factor 1: Attraction</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...</i> has beautiful scenery. 2) <i>Country ...</i> has a good climate. 3) <i>Country ...</i> offers interesting cultural events. 4) <i>Country ...</i> offers interesting historical attractions.
<p>Factor 2: Enjoyment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...</i> is a pleasing travel destination. 2) <i>Country ...</i> is an enjoyable travel destination. 3) <i>Country ...</i> is an exciting travel destination. 4) <i>Country ...</i> is a novel travel destination.
<p>Factor 3: Economic conditions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...</i> is technologically very advanced. 2) <i>Country ...</i>’s economy is mostly industrial (not agricultural). 3) <i>Country ...</i>’s economy is very modern.
<p>Factor 4: Political structure</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...</i>’s government/political system is very democratic. 2) <i>Country ...</i> is a very peaceful country. 3) <i>Country ...</i>’s citizens have a great deal of freedom.
<p>Factor 5: Environment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...</i> makes an aggressive effort to protect the environment. 2) <i>Country ...</i> maintains very high standards about the environment. 3) <i>Country ...</i> is very concerned about the environment.
<p>Factor 6: Labor</p>

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Workplace conditions in <i>Country</i> ... are generally very safe.2) <i>Country</i> ... is very considerate to its workers.3) <i>Country</i> ...'s workers are generally very well treated. |
|---|

Box 1 – The questions from the survey

Over the course of more than twenty years, many studies have demonstrated that consumers create perceptions of nations, which subsequently impact their beliefs and evaluations⁷⁰. Since such perceptions span across several aspects of the country, country image perception can be described as a multidimensional measure. For the present study, we have developed a new scale to measure the dimensions that capture the influence of the soft power associated with the organization of a global football event. Following a review of the literature, six dimensions relevant to the assessment of a country's image have been selected. These factors concern both what Byon & Zhang define as the organic and induced image of a country⁷¹. These are the features that affect the two dimensions of a country's image that can be apprehended without having a direct experience of it. The former arises from sources beyond tourism, like geography literature, TV broadcasts, or magazine features. The latter can originate from tourism-specific sources like destination brochures or travel websites, formed as a result of destination marketing efforts⁷¹. Both these dimensions have been selected for the assessment of the perceived image of a country as far as they are able to capture the general opinion towards it as well as a view that can presuppose an intention or motivation to travel to that very destination. Organizing the World Cup, as seen in the previous section, can impact a country in several ways. Not only is this research concerned with the abstract perception that a respondent might have of a country, but also with the more tangible dimension that considers the intention the respondent might have to visit that country or to do business with it. This is especially interesting considering the previously mentioned goals of employing soft power for the development of a strong Nation brand. Qatar's 'performative political practice' of hosting the 2022 World Cup gives an example of the two-folded aim of ridding a country's image of century-long stereotypical narratives and making themselves more attractive to other states and tourists.

The scale that has been employed to collect the data was constructed by adapting two existing scales for country image evaluation. The first is Byon & Zhang's scale for measuring

⁷⁰ Lala, V., Allred, A. T., & Chakraborty, G. (2008). A multidimensional scale for measuring country image. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 21(1), 51-66.

⁷¹ Byon, K. K., & Zhang, J. J. (2010). Development of a scale measuring destination image. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 28(4), 508-532. ISSN: 0263-4503

destination image⁷¹, from which we have selected two factors, each comprised of four items: attraction and enjoyment. The second is Lala et al.'s multidimensional scale for measuring country image⁷⁰. Four factors have been selected, each comprised of three items: economic conditions, political structure, environment, and labor. Each item of the scale has been analyzed by respondents through a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree). The factors have been chosen as they allow the respondent to depict the perceived image of the country that is consistent with the previously mentioned goals that an authoritarian state can pursue when organizing an event like the World Cup.

After the questions on the perceived image of the country, we asked the respondents their age and gender. Finally, for those respondents who were presented with the scenario of the organization of the football tournament, the last question of the survey asked the respondents whether they considered themselves football fans.

3.4 RESULTS

The socio-demographic questions at the end of the survey allow us to better characterize the respondents. The study reached a sample of 185 respondents, 48 of whom did not complete the survey (27% of respondents). Moreover, question 1 from factor 4 (*Country's government/political system is very democratic.*) served as an attention test. Whenever a respondent gave a score of 5 when being presented with cases 1a or 1b or gave a score of 1 when presented with cases 2a or 2b, those responses were considered incongruent. Two instances were deleted. The sample was thus reduced to 135 respondents. Of these, 75 identified as males (55.6%), 58 as females (43%), one as non-binary and one preferred not to specify. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 62 ($M_{Age}= 29.2$, $SD_{Age}= 7.0$). Of the respondents, those who chose the Italian version of the survey were 109 (80.7%).

As the four possible conditions were equally distributed among respondents, case 1a was encountered by 37 respondents (27.4% of all completed surveys), case 1b was encountered by 32 respondents (23.7% of all completed surveys), case 2a was encountered by 34 respondents (25.2% of all completed surveys), and case 2b was encountered by 32 respondents (23.7% of all completed surveys).

The first step before analyzing the results is to assess the validity and reliability of the scale.

3.4.1 Scale validity

Despite the scale employed for the research being adapted from two pre-validated scales, we have made adaptations for the purposes of this research. First, not all the factors from both scales have been selected, as they were not deemed necessary for the evaluation of a country from the perspective that this study aims to investigate. Moreover, a version of the survey has been administered in Italian after translating the pre-validated scales from English.

Convergent validity will be analyzed, as it tells us whether the multiple items that make up the scale converge to measure the underlying construct⁷², namely country image perception.

A correlation analysis has been performed to assess the convergent validity of the scale.

Using SPSS software, we have analyzed the Pearson Correlation. The critical value of 0.575 for the significance of the Pearson correlation coefficient has been selected from the table in Appendix 1 (DF = 17, $\alpha = 0.01$).

The SPSS output in Appendix 2 shows that the coefficient is sufficiently high (> 0.7) for every item except for item 4 from factor 2 (*Country ... is a novel travel destination.*). The item has consequently been removed from the scale.

3.4.2 Scale reliability

Assessing the reliability of the scale allows us to determine the extent to which the items in the survey relate to each other. It is, therefore, necessary to understand whether the items can consistently measure the construct that this study aims to investigate, namely country image perception. The assessment of the reliability of the scale has been conducted by evaluating the Cronbach Alpha, a widely used statistical measure that assesses the internal consistency or reliability of a scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater internal consistency. The threshold for accepting a scale will be 0.7.

The testing of the reliability has been run through IBM SPSS Statistics. The scale is composed of 19 items, four items concerning the perceived attraction of the country, three concerning the enjoyment associated with the country as a travel destination, three concerning the perceived economic conditions, three for the political structure, three for the country's relation with the environment, and three for working conditions. The Cronbach Alpha resulting from the analysis of the 19 items is 0.978, a more than adequate result (Appendix 3). Moreover, the correlation matrix in Appendix 3 shows how the value of the

⁷² Gefen, D., Straub, D., & Boudreau, M. C. (2000). Structural equation modeling and regression: Guidelines for research practice. *Communications of the association for information systems*, 4(1), 7.

Cronbach Alpha is lower whenever one of the items is eliminated. This tells us that the scale is reliable and requires no adjustments.

In order to carry out the analysis, a new variable has thus been computed: Country Image Perception. The variable has been obtained by calculating the mean responses to the 19 items that make up the scale. Country Impression therefore identifies the impression that each respondent has apprehended of the case that they have experienced in the survey.

3.5 H1

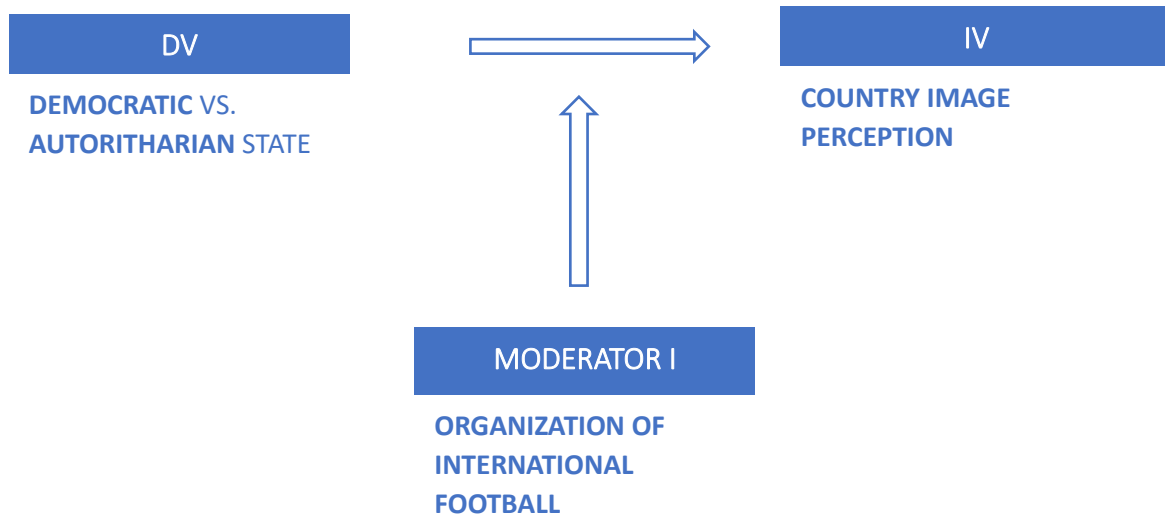


To test H1, whether respondents found democratic states to produce a better image than authoritarian states, an independent-samples t-test was run. The independent samples t-test permits to analyze whether two sample means from unrelated groups are significantly different. To do so, the group means regarding the variable Country Image Perception that will be confronted are between case 1a and case 2a, namely the descriptions of the two different countries without the added information of the organization of the football tournament. The test was run with a 95% confidence interval.

The results (Appendix 4) show that the participants commenting their impression of case 1a, authoritarian state, reported a worse country image perception ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.73$) than participants reporting on case 1b, democratic state ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.39$). This difference is significant ($p < .001$).

Considering the results obtained, it was possible to demonstrate the marginal significance of the hypothesis H1. That is to say, according to the selected sample, a country run by a democracy significantly generates a better image than an authoritarian state.

3.6 H2



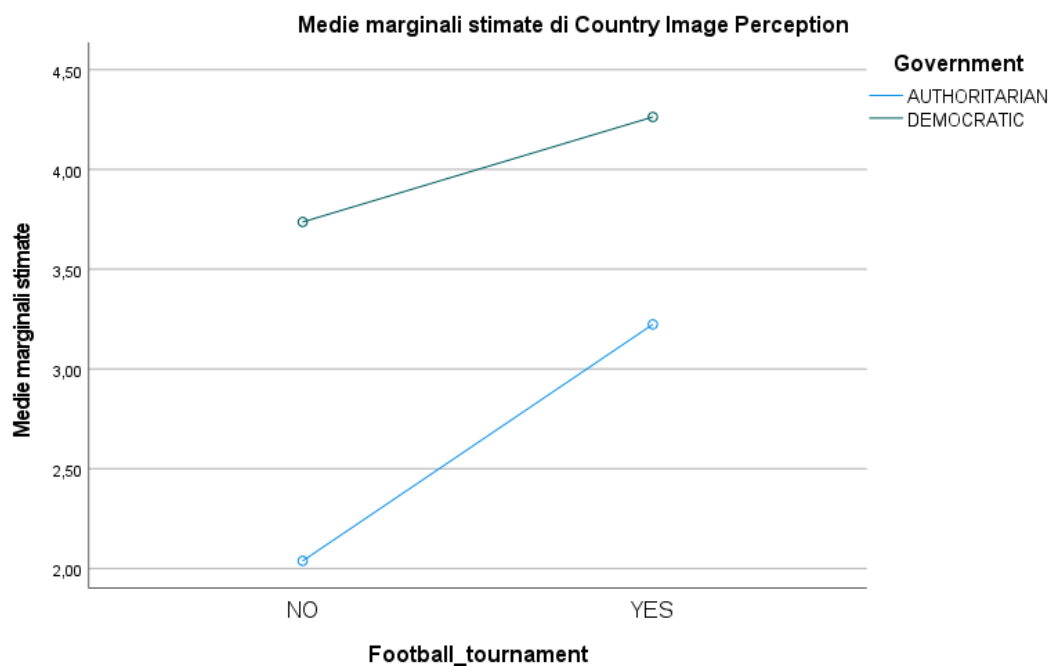
Moving to H2, the effect that was tested is whether the relationship identified in H1 can be mitigated by the presence or absence of the first moderator included in this study, namely the fact that the described country has organized an international football competition.

The analysis of the moderation effect theorized in H2 has been run through a two-way ANOVA. This type of analysis allows us to understand whether there are significant differences in means among the four groups of interest while considering the influence of two categorical factors, namely the type of government (democratic/authoritarian) and the presence/absence of the football tournament. We performed the two-way ANOVA to analyze the interaction effect of government type (authoritarian vs. democratic) and organization of international football competition (yes/no) on country image perception. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics resulting from the analysis. We can observe that the case with the lowest mean country image perception is case 1a (authoritarian state, no football tournament). When the authoritarian state organizes an international football tournament (1b), the mean of the DV is higher. The same can be said about the cases concerning the democratic state.

	Authoritarian State	Democratic State
Football tournament	$M_{CII} = 3.22$ $SD_{CII} = 0.49$	$M_{CII} = 4.23$ $SD_{CII} = 0.49$
No football tournament	$M_{CII} = 2.04$ $SD_{CII} = 0.73$	$M_{CII} = 3.74$ $SD_{CII} = 0.39$

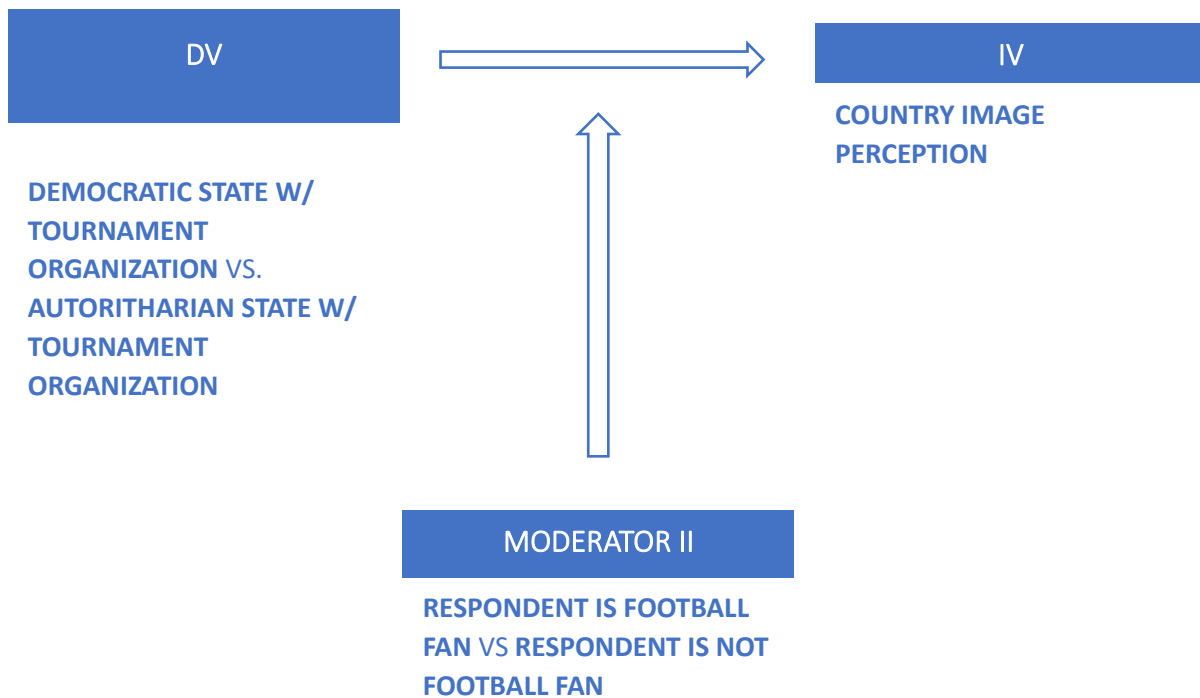
Box 2 – first ANOVA

The output of the analysis can be found in Appendix 5. The model fits the data well ($F(3, 135) = 88.7, p < 0.001$), indicating the presence of a significant difference in the means. The tests of between-subject effects warrant the significance of the effects of both IVs on the DV ($p < 0.001$), and, most relevantly, of the interaction term ($p = 0.002$). Since the output of the ANOVA has shown that the combined effect of football tournament organization and type of government yields a significance in mean difference among the cases, H2 is confirmed: European citizens do perceive a better image of an authoritarian state that organizes an international football competition than an authoritarian state that does not. The difference in means can be further appreciated in Graph 1, a representation of the two-way ANOVA on the dependent variable. The graph shows us how the most significant differences in means concern the marginal effect of football tournament organization in the cases of the authoritarian state.



Graph 1 – two-way ANOVA (Authoritarian vs. Democratic government, Organization of football tournament vs. not) on Country Image Perception

3.7 H3



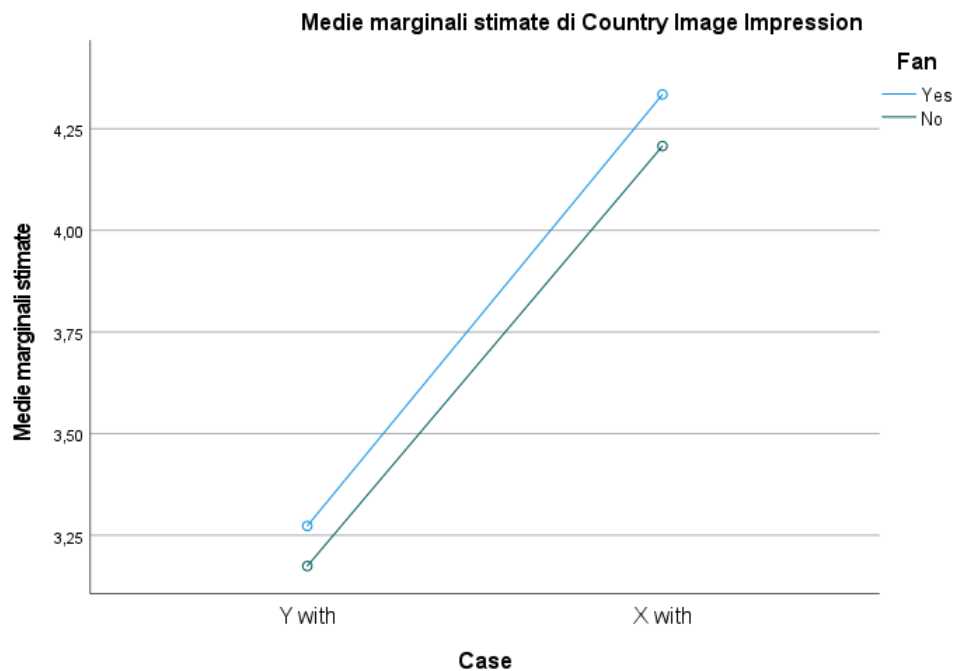
The further moderating effect of identification as a football fan or not has been tested through a 2-way ANOVA as well, since the cases that can be selected for assessing the marginal effect of football fandom must include the organization of the tournament. The analysis has thus been conducted on a modified dataset, with the subset only containing cases 1b and 2b. It is important to note that the study of H3 is now based on a different sample, smaller in size. The number of observations is 64, equally divided among the two cases considered. The age of the respondent ranges from 22 to 60 ($M_{Age} = 29.1$, $SD_{Age} = 6.9$). 29 of the respondents identified as women, and 30 identified as football fans (46%). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics that result from the ANOVA. The output of the analysis can be found in Appendix 6.

	Authoritarian State with tournament	Democratic State with tournament
Football fan	$M_{CII} = 3.27$ $SD_{CII} = 0.54$	$M_{CII} = 4.34$ $SD_{CII} = 0.79$
Not football fan	$M_{CII} = 3.17$ $SD_{CII} = 0.45$	$M_{CII} = 4.21$ $SD_{CII} = 0.65$

Box 3 – second ANOVA

The fit of the overall model is good ($F(3, 64) = 15.37$, $p < 0.001$). When it comes to the interaction term, nevertheless, the difference in means is marginal and not significant ($p = 0.927$). Considering this result, H3 must be rejected, meaning that the identification as a

football fan or not does not cause a significantly different country image perception between an authoritarian or democratic state organizing an international football competition. Graph 2 visually displays the findings of H2. Although for both countries run by authoritarian and democratic governments, the marginal effect of the IV (football fan vs. not) is always positive in case the respondent identifies as a football fan, the effect is visibly very small and not significant.



Graph 2- two-way ANOVA (Authoritarian vs. Democratic government, Identification as football fan vs. not) on Country Image Perception

4) DISCUSSION

The objective of this study has been to investigate the potential for a major international football competition, such as the FIFA World Cup, to influence the public's perception of the event's host. It is not any organizing country we have been interested in. The heroes of this story are those countries run by an authoritarian government. Labeling a state as authoritarian can be ambiguous and may be done by considering several distinctive features of that country's government or society that limit the freedom of its citizens. As far as this research is concerned, among the many metrics and indexes that do so, tolerance towards power and hierarchical differences, and the degree of political freedom and respect for civil liberties have been selected to characterize the country's government as authoritarian. Authoritarian

states tend to concentrate power in the hands of a single leader or a small group of individuals. This concentration of power can result in limited tolerance for dissenting voices or opposition, leading to a lack of political pluralism. In addition, hierarchical differences in authoritarian states are typically pronounced. There is a clear and rigid hierarchy of authority, with limited opportunities for upward mobility or political participation outside of the established power structure⁷³. The second index has been selected since authoritarian states often restrict political freedoms, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. This suppression of dissenting voices can contribute to a climate of limited political freedom. Civil liberties, such as the right to a fair trial, freedom from arbitrary detention, and protection from state surveillance, are often curtailed in authoritarian states as well. This can result in citizens having limited protection against state intrusion into their private lives.

The nature of the influence that we have explored is the mitigation of negative sentiments that may be associated with that authoritarian state. Their development may come as the result of both the rational assessment of the country's economic, political, and social dimensions, and, more importantly, the emotions that people attach to it. To capture these sentiments, a new scale has been developed comprising several different factors that successfully make up what we have defined as country image perception. The study consulted a sample of European citizens, in order to achieve results that can significantly and accurately portray the European population's perception of the image of a country run by an authoritarian regime.

Moving on to the research model, H1 served to establish a baseline. Before any inquiry on the effects caused by the moderators included in the model can be conducted, the relationship between European citizens and authoritarian states must be determined in the first place. Having accepted H1, namely that the perception of the image associated with an authoritarian state is worse than that of a democratic state, we have proceeded to examine whether a significant effect in mitigating those negative opinions could be observed when that country organizes a major international football competition (Table 5).

⁷³ Kalu, K. N. (2019). A functional theory of government, law, and institutions. Rowman & Littlefield.

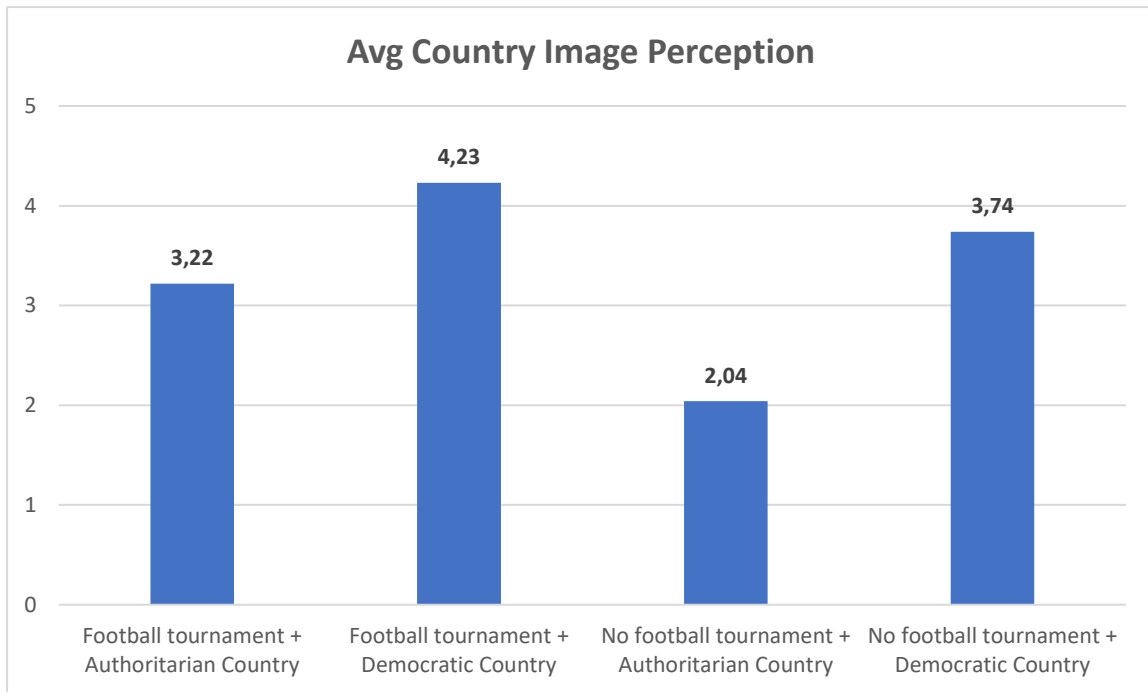


Table 5 – Average country image perception H2

H2 was confirmed as well, a finding that allows us to better understand the endeavors of authoritarian states that invest conspicuous resources and take on significant risks to become the home of the most important football competition in the world. The final contribution of the present study is warranted by the rejection of H3. The second moderating variable introduced in the model, namely the identification of the respondent as a football fan or not, was included to determine whether the effect discovered in H2 could be applicable beyond the sole realm of football (Table 6).

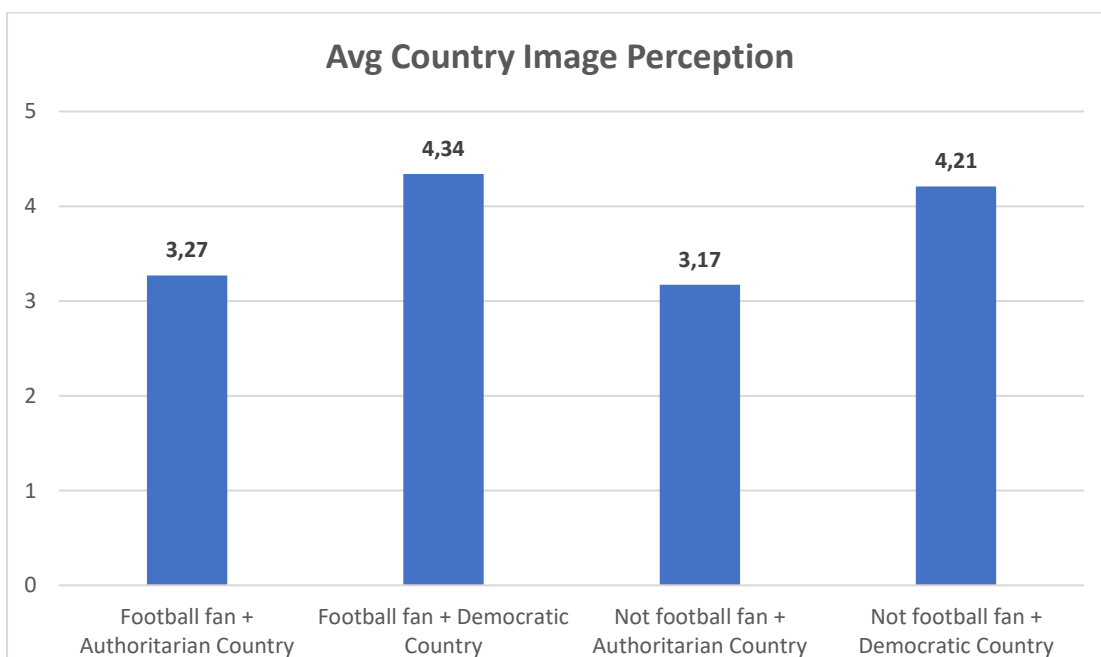


Table 6 – Average country image perception H3

The resulting rejection of H3 further corroborates the findings of H2 by eliminating what could have represented a confounding variable. Football fans can sometimes see the world through hexagonal, black-and-white colored glasses, and thus have a biased judgment of those that are for any reason involved in their favorite sport. What we have discovered through H3 is that it is not relevant to a country run by an authoritarian regime for someone to be a football fan if it wants to improve the tarnished reputation that person holds for it by organizing an international football tournament. The image-shaping power of the FIFA World Cup, or any other major international football competition that is yet to be created, goes beyond the immutable principles (or ever-changing whims) of football fans.

The organization of the World Cup carries with itself a set of heuristic cues that allow the population to apprehend a different image of the host country. This research has unveiled how those cues alone can constitute a halo effect that successfully improves the image that the organizing country projects on the public. By hosting a major international event like the World Cup, the authoritarian state can present itself to the world with a new and improved image. On the one hand, it can showcase its ability to organize and manage a large-scale event efficiently, which can challenge negative stereotypes. On the other hand, it can claim for itself those positive emotions that people devote to the World Cup. Regardless of which dimension is more effective in shaping the authoritarian state's reputation, we have shown how taking the role of the tournament organizer can significantly and positively alter the perception associated with that country. A country that once was seen with distrust or of which people were not even aware could now crown itself as the enabler of a beloved sporting event.

Qatar, for instance, was able to masterfully take advantage of the strongest emotional moment of the tournament, marking it with one of its traditional symbols. After winning the 2022 World Cup final against France, Argentina's captain Lionel Messi, considered to be one of the best football players of all time, lifted the World Cup amidst the jubilation of his teammates and his entire nation. Messi's outfit, however, was slightly different from that of his teammates. The Argentinian captain was wearing a Bisht, a Qatari traditional cloak, worn

during special occasions, symbolizing appreciation, and respect⁷⁴. The robe was placed on Messi by Qatari Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Given the emotionally and symbolically laden moment, Sheikh Al Thani's timing was impeccable. He was able to tie an important element of his country's culture to the most memorable moment of the tournament, managing to secure the endorsement of one of the most influential football players in the world. When individuals are publicly honored, praised, and admired for a specific attribute, this admiration can cast a positive light on those associated with them⁴. Qatar thus exploited the halo effect identified in this study by associating themselves with the positive emotions people impute to the World Cup, in an attempt to direct those emotions toward its image and improve its international brand. Billions of people were finally seeing the small Gulf state's new guise, or, more precisely, they were seeing Qatar's same old guise, but in a completely new context.

In conclusion, hosting the World Cup permits the authoritarian state to introduce a new narrative for portraying its character in the global theater. A narrative towards which Europeans, either football fans or not, do not seem to remain indifferent.

4.1 Theoretical contributions

Firstly, the findings of this study contribute to the existing research on soft power and nation branding. We have so far empirically demonstrated that hosting international football competitions can positively impact the image of authoritarian states among European citizens. This adds to the theoretical discourse on how countries strategically use sports events to shape their global image. Moreover, the study sheds light on how perceptions of authoritarian governments can be influenced by non-political factors like sports events, and how these dynamics are not influenced by sports fandom. This contributes to the understanding of what factors influence individuals in forming their perceptions of countries, moving beyond traditional political and economic factors.

In addition, by showing that hosting football competitions can improve the image of authoritarian states, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of authoritarian regimes. *Section 2.8* outlined the current rise in power and popularity of authoritarian governments at the expense of world democracies, and how this process can sometimes

⁷⁴ Aljazeera (2022). "What is a bisht and why was Messi wearing it at the World Cup?". Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/19/why-was-messi-wearing-a-bisht-at-world-cup-ceremony>

meander beneath people's awareness. The findings of this research help to highlight how these regimes are not solely viewed through a political lens but can also benefit from positive associations related to sports, shedding light on those covert sportswashing mechanisms that may allow an authoritarian government to thrive.

4.2 Managerial implications

The results presented in this paper also open the door to considerations from a managerial point of view. The findings offer insights for authoritarian states looking to enhance their global image. Hosting international football competitions could be considered as part of their nation branding strategy, helping them appeal to a broader international audience and potentially mitigating negative perceptions. This is especially true if they can manage and prevent, at least to some extent, the potential backlash. The FIFA World Cup, as an effective soft power tool, can help authoritarian states attract tourists, boost domestic goods' value, lure foreign investment, and attract talented residents.

Considering investors and stakeholders involved in organizing international football competitions in countries that have authoritarian states, they can be aware of the potential dual impact of their events, economic gains from the event itself, and potential positive image effects for the host country.

To conclude, European policymakers and diplomatic bodies might find these findings useful in considering how they engage with authoritarian states. Understanding the potential soft power effects of international sporting events can inform diplomatic strategies and raise their awareness of how, by awarding these events to autocratic countries, they might be encouraging their normalization.

4.3 Limitations & future research directions

Given the broadness of the topic and research gap, and the numerous ways in which they can be tackled, this research is not exempt from significant shortcomings. The most evident limitation lies in the sample size and its potential for representativeness. Having successfully consulted only 135 respondents with an average age of 29, doubts can be raised about the adequacy of the size of such a sample and its power to represent the population it aims to describe, namely the European population, for which the median age as of 2022 was 44 years

old⁷⁵. Moreover, with 81% of respondents having selected the Italian version of the survey, the sample would seem to be more representative of an Italian point of view rather than a European one. The inclusion of respondents from more European countries is needed in future research to overcome an important shortcoming of this study. A further limitation regarding the administration of the survey concerns the lack of incentives to compel respondents to pay attention to the questionnaire and complete it, which resulted in 26% of unfinished surveys. This research would certainly benefit from an additional quantitative analysis, such as a focus group, to elicit more accurate and sincere responses.

If we consider the characterization of the country through its description in the survey, concerns can be raised about the arbitrariness of the metrics and indexes that we have selected. Although a detailed account justifying their assortment has been provided, it is indeed one of the many ways in which a country's government can be categorized as either authoritarian or democratic. It would be interesting for future research to employ different metrics for describing the countries' governments. Moreover, one piece of information that could impact the results of the survey would be the inclusion of information regarding the backlash and allegations that the organization of a World Cup encounters. This information was not included in the current study as it was not deemed necessary for the characterization of a country's government and could have introduced a biasing element. Nevertheless, considering the findings of this study, it would be interesting for future studies to investigate how much respondents would be influenced by an explicit reminder of the social injustices that are often proper of an authoritarian state.

To conclude, what this study has shown is that an authoritarian regime can improve the image that the European public creates of it by organizing a major international football competition. What it has not shown is how this dynamic comes to be. Having constructed the survey by aggregating several factors, each able to capture a different aspect of country image perception, it is fairly straightforward for future researchers to investigate which of these factors are more or less prominent in shaping the respondents' perception of the image of the country. Mediating analyses, for example, could be conducted to unearth the dynamics that characterize the black box, as it has been conceived in this research, which is country image

⁷⁵ Eurostat (2023). "Half of EU's population older than 44.4 years in 2022". Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230222-1#:~:text=On%201%20January%202022%2C%20the,the%20other%20half%20was%20younger>

formation. Moreover, the same analysis could be carried out with the employment of different scales that capture diverse elements that may influence the formation of the image of a country. Features like its global influence, social values, or even its cuisine could be interesting factors that reveal a person's perspective of that country by capturing aspects that are different from the ones investigated in this research. Finally, Neuromarketing tools, such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) or Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) measures, could be employed to track the unconscious emotional responses that shape country image perception.

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APPENDIX 1 – Table of Critical Values for Pearson’s *r*

Table of Critical Values for Pearson’s *r*

df	Level of Significance for a One-Tailed Test					
	.10	.05	.025	.01	.005	.0005
	Level of Significance for a Two-Tailed Test					
	.20	.10	.05	.02	.01	.001
1	0.951	0.988	0.997	0.9995	0.9999	0.99999
2	0.800	0.900	0.950	0.980	0.990	0.999
3	0.687	0.805	0.878	0.934	0.959	0.991
4	0.608	0.729	0.811	0.882	0.917	0.974
5	0.551	0.669	0.755	0.833	0.875	0.951
6	0.507	0.621	0.707	0.789	0.834	0.925
7	0.472	0.582	0.666	0.750	0.798	0.898
8	0.443	0.549	0.632	0.715	0.765	0.872
9	0.419	0.521	0.602	0.685	0.735	0.847
10	0.398	0.497	0.576	0.658	0.708	0.823
11	0.380	0.476	0.553	0.634	0.684	0.801
12	0.365	0.457	0.532	0.612	0.661	0.780
13	0.351	0.441	0.514	0.592	0.641	0.760
14	0.338	0.426	0.497	0.574	0.623	0.742
15	0.327	0.412	0.482	0.558	0.606	0.725
16	0.317	0.400	0.468	0.542	0.590	0.708
17	0.308	0.389	0.456	0.529	0.575	0.693
18	0.299	0.378	0.444	0.515	0.561	0.679
19	0.291	0.369	0.433	0.503	0.549	0.665
20	0.284	0.360	0.423	0.492	0.537	0.652
21	0.277	0.352	0.413	0.482	0.526	0.640
22	0.271	0.344	0.404	0.472	0.515	0.629
23	0.265	0.337	0.396	0.462	0.505	0.618
24	0.260	0.330	0.388	0.453	0.496	0.607
25	0.255	0.323	0.381	0.445	0.487	0.597
26	0.250	0.317	0.374	0.437	0.479	0.588
27	0.245	0.311	0.367	0.430	0.471	0.579
28	0.241	0.306	0.361	0.423	0.463	0.570
29	0.237	0.301	0.355	0.416	0.456	0.562
30	0.233	0.296	0.349	0.409	0.449	0.554
40	0.202	0.257	0.304	0.358	0.393	0.490
60	0.165	0.211	0.250	0.295	0.325	0.408
12						
∞	0.117	0.150	0.178	0.210	0.232	0.294
∞	0.057	0.073	0.087	0.103	0.114	0.146

Adapted from Appendix 2 (Critical Values of *t*) using the square root of [$t^2/(t^2 + df)$]
 Note: Critical values for Infinite *df* actually calculated for *df*= 500.

(Aspelmeier, J. (2005). Table of critical values for Pearson’s *r*.)

APPENDIX 2 – Scale Validity

		Total
X w/o ATTRACTION ENG - The previously described country has beautiful scenery.	Correlazione di Pearson	,782**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ATTRACTION ENG - The previously described country has good climate.	Correlazione di Pearson	,837**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ATTRACTION ENG - The previously described country has interesting cultural events.	Correlazione di Pearson	,845**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ATTRACTION ENG - The previously described country has interesting historical attractions.	Correlazione di Pearson	,846**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENJOYMENT ENG - The previously described country is a pleasing travel destination.	Correlazione di Pearson	,860**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENJOYMENT ENG - The previously described country is an enjoyable travel destination.	Correlazione di Pearson	,866**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENJOYMENT ENG - The previously described country is an exciting travel destination.	Correlazione di Pearson	,870**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENJOYMENT ENG - The previously described country is a novel travel destination.	Correlazione di Pearson	,388
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ECON COND ENG - The previously described country is technologically very advanced.	Correlazione di Pearson	,760**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ECON COND ENG - The previously described country's economy is mostly industrial (not agricultural).	Correlazione di Pearson	,745**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ECON COND ENG - The previously described country's economy is very modern.	Correlazione di Pearson	,830**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o POL STRUCT ENG - The previously described country's government/political system is very democratic.	Correlazione di Pearson	,832**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o POL STRUCT ENG - The previously described country is a very peaceful country.	Correlazione di Pearson	,875**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o POL STRUCT ENG - The previously described country's citizens have a great deal of freedom.	Correlazione di Pearson	,874**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENV ENG - The previously described country makes an aggressive effort to protect the environment.	Correlazione di Pearson	,856**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENV ENG - The previously described country maintains very high standards about the environment.	Correlazione di Pearson	,843**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o ENV ENG - The previously described country is very concerned about the environment.	Correlazione di Pearson	,849**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o LABOR ENG - Workplace conditions in the previously described country are generally very safe.	Correlazione di Pearson	,878**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o LABOR ENG - The previously described country is very considerate to its workers.	Correlazione di Pearson	,909**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
X w/o LABOR ENG - The previously described country's workers are generally very well treated.	Correlazione di Pearson	,918**
	Sign. (a due code)	<,001
	N	135
Total	Correlazione di Pearson	1
	Sign. (a due code)	
	N	135

APPENDIX 3

Statistiche di affidabilità

Alpha di Cronbach	Alpha di Cronbach basata su elementi standardizzati	N. di elementi
,978	,978	19

APPENDIX 4

Statistiche gruppo

	Case	N	Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
Country Image Perception	1a	37	2,0384	,72480	,11916
	2a	34	3,7368	,38806	,06655

Test campioni indipendenti

		Test di Levene per l'eguaglianza delle varianze		Test t per l'eguaglianza delle medie							
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Significatività		Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
						P unilaterale	P bilaterale			Inferiore	Superiore
Country Image Perception	Varianze uguali presunte	32,595	<,001	-12,152	69	<,001	<,001	-1,69844	,13976	-1,97726	-1,41961
	Varianze uguali non presunte			-12,444	56,017	<,001	<,001	-1,69844	,13648	-1,97184	-1,42503

Dimensioni effetto campioni indipendenti

		Standardizzatore e ^a	Stima del punto	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
				Inferiore	Superiore
Country Image Perception	D di Cohen	,58831	-2,887	-3,551	-2,212
	Correzione di Hedges	,59481	-2,855	-3,512	-2,188
	Delta di Glass	,38806	-4,377	-5,520	-3,221

a. Il denominatore utilizzato per stimare le dimensioni dell'effetto.

D di Cohen utilizza la deviazione standard raggruppata.

La correzione Hedges utilizza la deviazione standard raggruppata, più un fattore di correzione.

Il delta di Glass utilizza la deviazione standard del campione del gruppo di controllo.

APPENDIX 5

Fattori tra soggetti

		Etichetta valore	N
Football_tournament	1	NO	71
	2	YES	64
Government	1	AUTHORITARIAN	69
	2	DEMOCRATIC	66

Statistiche descrittive

Variabile dipendente: Country Image Perception

Football_tournament	Government	Medio	Deviazione std.	N
NO	AUTHORITARIAN	2,0384	,72480	37
	DEMOCRATIC	3,7368	,38806	34
	Totale	2,8517	1,03505	71
YES	AUTHORITARIAN	3,2237	,49155	32
	DEMOCRATIC	4,2632	,70651	32
	Totale	3,7434	,79933	64
Totale	AUTHORITARIAN	2,5881	,86185	69
	DEMOCRATIC	3,9920	,62029	66
	Totale	3,2745	1,02945	135

Test di effetti tra soggetti

Variabile dipendente: Country Image Perception

Origine	Somma dei quadrati di tipo III	df	Media quadratica	F	Sig.	Eta quadrato parziale
Modello corretto	95,162 ^a	3	31,721	88,704	<,001	,670
Intercetta	1478,770	1	1478,770	4135,253	<,001	,969
Football_tournament	24,631	1	24,631	68,878	<,001	,345
Government	63,025	1	63,025	176,245	<,001	,574
Football_tournament * Government	3,651	1	3,651	10,209	,002	,072
Errore	46,846	131	,358			
Totale	1589,493	135				
Totale corretto	142,008	134				

a. R-quadrato = ,670 (R-quadrato adattato = ,663)

APPENDIX 6

Fattori tra soggetti

		Etichetta valore	N
Fan	1	Yes	30
	2	No	34
Case	1	Y with	32
	2	X with	32

Statistiche descrittive

Variabile dipendente: Country Image Impression

Fan	Case	Medio	Deviazione std.	N
Yes	Y with	3,2730	,54331	16
	X with	4,3346	,79058	14
	Totale	3,7684	,85030	30
No	Y with	3,1743	,44606	16
	X with	4,2076	,65176	18
	Totale	3,7214	,76375	34
Totale	Y with	3,2237	,49155	32
	X with	4,2632	,70651	32
	Totale	3,7434	,79933	64

Test di effetti tra soggetti

Variabile dipendente: Country Image Impression

Origine	Somma dei quadrati di tipo III	df	Media quadratica	F	Sig.
Modello corretto	17,493 ^a	3	5,831	15,372	<,001
Intercetta	891,671	1	891,671	2350,719	<,001
Fan	,202	1	,202	,533	,468
Case	17,415	1	17,415	45,911	<,001
Fan * Case	,003	1	,003	,008	,927
Errore	22,759	60	,379		
Totale	937,097	64			
Totale corretto	40,252	63			

a. R-quadro = ,435 (R-quadro adattato = ,406)

SUMMARY

- Literature review

This research delves into the intricate relationship between sports and politics, particularly focusing on the connection between international sporting events, like the FIFA World Cup, and political strategies undertaken by authoritarian states. Such events have been used as platforms to express national identity, promote ideologies, and influence public opinion. Key political goals often intertwined with sports include fostering patriotism, diplomatic endeavors, boycotts, protests, and athlete activism.

The study primarily focuses on the FIFA World Cup, considering its global relevance, especially in football's rapidly growing popularity. European professional football has seen a significant increase in value, nearly doubling since 2010, up to becoming worth almost 30 billion euros today. Factors contributing to this growth include the accessibility of football, amplified by the proliferation of television, internet streaming, and social media. Major international competitions draw enormous global attention, transcending national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. Football has evolved into a cultural and societal phenomenon, symbolizing identity, community, and shared values.

FIFA, the international governing body of association football, has played a pivotal role in expanding football's global reach. In 2022, FIFA recorded the highest revenue figure, reaching 5.7 billion U.S. dollars. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar attracted a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators, surpassing the 2018 edition in Russia. The final match alone garnered a staggering 1.5 billion viewers worldwide, while digital engagement with FIFA's channels increased significantly.

This study focuses on how an authoritarian state's organization of a major international football competition can impact the perception of European citizens towards that state. Football has played a significant role in shaping European identity, bringing together people across borders through shared sportsmanship, national pride, and cultural exchanges.

The Europeanization of football, as proposed by De Witte and Zglinski (2022), suggests how Europe has influenced the world of football. Key developments include the 1995 Bosman ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union, which facilitated the movement of players across European countries, and the creation of trans-European club competitions like the UEFA Champions League. These competitions are celebrated by fans not only as club

achievements but also as representations of their countries. Football has become a powerful symbol of European identity, reflecting daily life within nation-states and fostering a sense of Europeanism.

Such symbolic function proper to European football can be framed and interpreted within the notion of “Banal nationalism”. Introduced by Michael Billig, the concept refers to the subtle and routine ways in which nationalism is reproduced in everyday life. In the context of football, it includes the use of national symbols, anthems, and flags, all of which reaffirm the idea of Europe. Regina Weber further applies this concept to European club football, highlighting how football enforces European identity through everyday practices. While empirical evidence supporting this assumption is limited, Weber has pointed out that sports, especially football, can provide a shared experience that contributes to a sense of European identity among a diverse range of citizens.

The premises that have been delineated in the previous section are relevant as the current research assumes the existence of a shared European identity which is influenced, at least in part, by football and international football tournaments. The study thus aims to investigate how organizing such tournaments by authoritarian states may influence this shared European identity.

Football's evolution has been marked by distinct eras, as outlined by Giulianotti (1999). The 'traditional' era, up to the First World War, focused on rule-setting, national associations, and international diffusion. The 'modern' era, from the 1920s to the late 1980s, saw football's global rise, with superstars emerging, continental confederations forming, and television becoming prominent. In this era, club revenues shifted from gate receipts to sponsorship and merchandising. Finally, the 'post-modern' era, beginning in the late 1980s, is mainly characterized by football's commercialization. The rise in the commercial value of broadcasting rights saw television companies gaining considerable control over clubs and their revenue streams. Stadiums were revamped, but this approach sometimes neglected dedicated fans. Fans in this era became a new middle class, consuming various football media. The surge in the revenues associated with television profits benefited top clubs and players. However, it also led to rising wages. While European top leagues' revenues surged by 115% from 1999 to 2011, the rapid escalation of wages caused financial strain for several clubs. For instance, in the 2020/21 season, Manchester United and Manchester City spent 65% and 62% of their income on wages, respectively. Some clubs, like Fulham, faced wage

bills almost equal to their revenue. Directors confronted with the choice between influencing football in the present era and running clubs as viable businesses often opted for the former. English clubs, elite clubs in particular, thus amassed unprecedented debt levels despite record revenues.

To address mounting debt, European clubs sought capital. Western enterprises reduced their financial contributions, especially after the 2008 global recession. Instead, resource-rich countries like Russia, China, India, and Gulf States stepped in, reshaping the football industry (Thani & Heenan 2017). The English Premier League witnessed a significant shift with foreign investment, notably marked by Roman Abramovich's takeover of Chelsea in 2003. Abramovich's wealth, partly accumulated from the post-Soviet loans-for-shares privatization auction, raised ethical concerns due to its source. This event set the stage for increased foreign involvement in English football. Russian investment extended beyond funding individual clubs. Gazprom, a Russian state-owned energy corporation, sponsored FIFA for around 40 million euros per season. However, Gazprom's sponsorship, unrelated to consumer products, raised questions about its returns.

Abramovich's Chelsea acquisition paved the way for Arab investors in European football. Dubai's Emirates Airways signed a major sponsorship deal with Arsenal in 2004, later expanding to AC Milan and Real Madrid. Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mansour acquired Manchester City in 2008, while Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) took control of PSG in 2011. Both owners injected significant capital, improving their clubs' financial status.

Gulf countries were also able to attract top clubs like AC Milan, Real Madrid, Manchester City, and Hamburg SV by hosting friendly matches, gaining global media attention. In 2009 the first major official global event was hosted in the Gulf, when FIFA Club World Cup took place in Abu Dhabi, involving teams from multiple continents.

Saudi Arabia's hosting of the Italian Supercoppa final also contribute to mark a shift in football's geographical center. Oil-rich countries like Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE aimed to bring global football closer to them by organizing major international tournaments. In 2010, FIFA selected Russia and Qatar to host the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups, respectively, marking a turning point in football's global landscape.

The awarding of the FIFA World Cup to Russia and Qatar generated both celebrations and backlash. While Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and FIFA President Sepp Blatter expressed joy, British newspapers claimed the World Cup had been "sold" to Russia, and American media alleged corruption in the bidding process. These controversies eventually led to Sepp Blatter's resignation as FIFA president in 2015. Concerns extended to issues within these countries. Russia's annexation of Crimea and allegations of racial abuse and discrimination raised questions about hosting the World Cup in the country. Similarly, Qatar faced criticism for its treatment of migrant workers, lack of LGBT rights, and concerns about safety.

Both Russia and Qatar have authoritarian traits in their political systems. Russia, despite being a democracy since 1993, is considered a Consolidated Authoritarian regime due to the suppression of civil society, discrimination, and repression of independent media. Qatar, a unitary authoritarian parliamentary semi-constitutional monarchy, lacks political parties, and political power is concentrated in the emir.

These countries initially injected significant money into European football, which was largely celebrated by fans. However, concerns began to rise as they took on more prominent roles in organizing tournaments. Hosting the World Cup exposed these nations to scrutiny, especially in the context of their authoritarian systems and the massive costs involved in organizing the event. The economic benefits of hosting the World Cup have diminished over time, making it an expensive endeavor. Qatar, in particular, has invested heavily in infrastructure for the event, with uncertain short-term profitability.

Given the costs and risks associated with hosting the World Cup, it's essential to understand the rationale behind these countries' decisions to do so, especially in the context of their authoritarian political systems. A concept that can help us shed some light on the question motivating this research is the concept of nation branding. Nation branding involves applying branding and marketing strategies to enhance a nation's image. States act as brands to thrive in a competitive world where entities, individuals, and nations create distinct identities to gain attention and recognition. People's attitudes towards nations often involve emotions rather than rational evaluations. Managing a nation's image and reputation is therefore vital for creating an appealing brand. It can help states to foster a positive image, attract tourists, boost domestic goods' value, lure foreign investment, and attract talented residents.

The perception of a nation's brand can be managed and shaped through what Joseph Nye has defined as soft power (1990). Soft power involves influencing others through attraction, persuasion, and cultural appeal rather than coercion or force. Sports, including football, are effective tools for exerting soft power. They can instill domestic pride, project a national identity internationally, and enhance a country's international image.

Authoritarian states have a history of using sports, especially major events like the World Cup, to shape their international image. These events provide an opportunity to present a carefully crafted image to the world, counteracting negative perceptions or stereotypes. For example, Germany used the 2006 World Cup to improve its international image, countering historical stereotypes associated with the Third Reich. Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup is seen as a means to project an international image of a modern, open-minded, Muslim Arab society. The goal is to attract other countries by displaying this image during the event. However, there are challenges, including addressing negative perceptions associated with the region.

The pursuit of soft power in the realm of global sports can inadvertently lead to soft disempowerment, where nations disrupt, offend, or isolate others, diminishing their appeal and influence. For instance, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup faced backlash due to concerns about its integrity, unfair practices, discriminatory behavior, and unwelcoming attitudes. This raised questions about Qatar's legitimacy as a global community participant. Sportswashing is a term that has gained prominence and exemplifies soft disempowerment. It involves manipulating the positive aspects of sports to divert attention from moral violations, projecting an image of reform and progress while avoiding external scrutiny. Sportswashing leverages the emotional connections and identity-related allegiances established through sports to create a halo effect, where the wrongdoer seeks recognition and prestige within a sporting community, shielding themselves from criticism.

Qatar's involvement in global football can serve as a means to distract from domestic inequalities, minimize moral transgressions, and position itself as a sovereign nation with minor shortcomings. Similar dynamics may arise as countries like Saudi Arabia and China have expressed interest in hosting future World Cup editions. Through this study we address the gap in understanding these dynamics.

This research aims to investigate the relevance and context of the study within existing literature. It focuses on the perception of authoritarian regimes. In the first place, these regimes are contrary to the principles of the European multilateral order. Secondly, scholars have been observing a global expansion of authoritarian rule.

The first hypothesis (H1) examines whether European citizens have a more positive perception of democratic states compared to authoritarian ones. The expected outcome is for countries run by democracies to be perceived better than autocratic countries by European citizens.

This leads to the second contribution of the research, which explores how authoritarian states have increasingly sought to gain international influence through football. While previous scholars have qualitatively analyzed this trend, this research adopts an empirical and quantitative approach to provide fresh insights. The second hypothesis (H2), therefore, investigates whether European citizens perceive authoritarian countries more positively when they have organized major international football competitions.

Lastly, the study addresses a gap in existing literature by distinguishing between the effects of authoritarian states' involvement in sports on football fans and those uninterested in football. It acknowledges that while football is immensely popular, not everyone is a fan. The research questions whether the impact of organizing such events differs based on whether the respondent identifies as a football fan (H3).

- The research

This research is a quantitative experimental study following a 2x2 between-subjects design. The study involved administering a survey with four different stimuli to a convenience sample. The survey was conducted on the Qualtrics platform between July and August 2023.

The decision to limit the survey to European citizens was twofold. Firstly, it was due to the availability of respondents, who were selected from Europe for ease of access. Secondly, Europe's strong association with football and its influence on European identity suggested that the study's focus on European citizens would yield more significant results.

The research model is structured as follows. The study first examines the relationship between the type of government (democratic or autocratic) in a country and how European

citizens perceive the image of that country. The expectation is that democratic states will be perceived more favorably.

H1: European citizens perceive a better image of a democratic state compared to an authoritarian state.

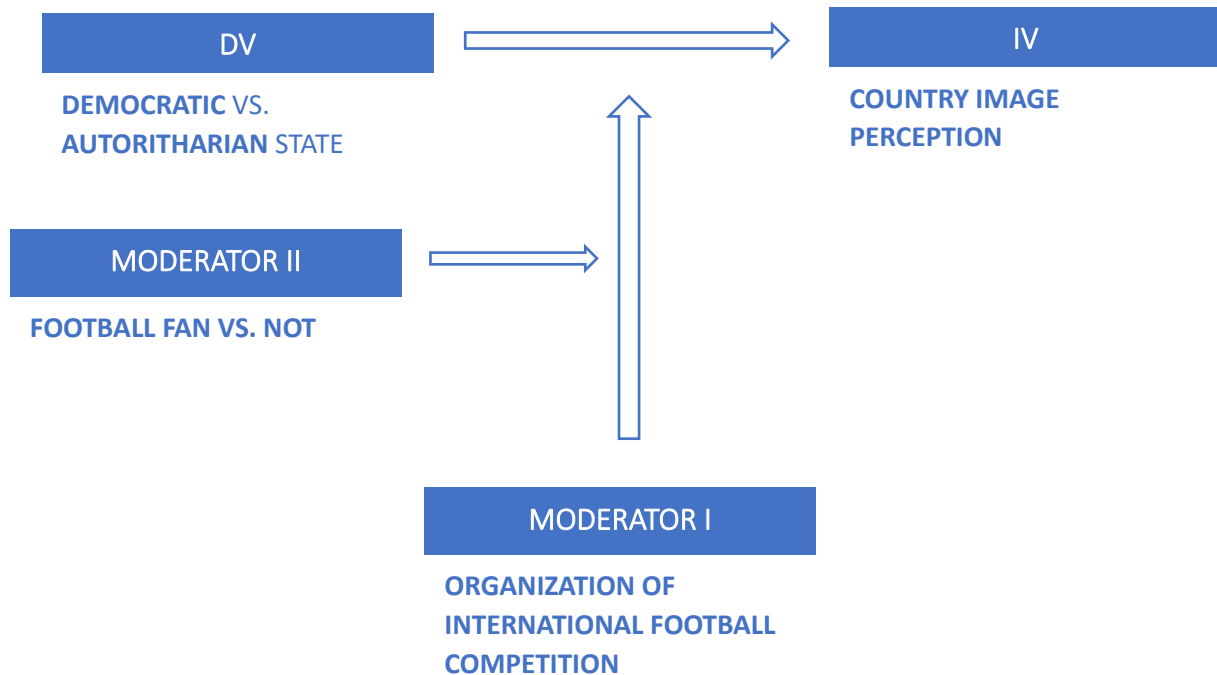
After evaluating H1, the study investigates whether the organization of an international football competition, like the FIFA World Cup, moderates this perception. The second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: European citizens perceive a better image of an authoritarian state that hosts an international football competition compared to one that does not.

The study also considers the effect of identifying as a football fan on the findings of H2 to control for potential confounding variables. The third hypothesis is:

H3: The effect explored in H2 differs significantly when a respondent identifies as a football fan compared to when they do not.

In summary, this research aims to understand how organizing international football competitions influences the perception of authoritarian states by European citizens, considering the potential moderating effect of football fandom.



In the study, each respondent was presented with one of four different scenarios, each describing a fictitious country. These scenarios were randomly assigned to ensure an equal distribution of responses among the different conditions. Each respondent was equally likely to encounter any of the scenarios.

The survey began with a brief introduction and an assurance of respondent anonymity. Instructions on how the survey was structured were then provided. The specific instructions given depended on whether the scenario included the organization of an international football tournament or not. This way, respondents knew what to expect before encountering the scenario description.

The cases presented were the following:

- **Case 1a** → *description of fictitious authoritarian state*
Country Y is a unitary authoritarian parliamentary semi-constitutional monarchy with a population of 35,95 million. Its GDP per capita is US\$ 29,922 (#38 in the world, 2023).
Country X is categorized as Not Free in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index's annual report. The index assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world. *Country X* has a Power Distance Index (PDI) of 80. The PDI refers to the degree of inequality that exists between people with and without power. The index can take on a value between 1 and 120; high values indicate that a society accepts an unequal, hierarchical distribution of power. In 2022, *Country Y* counted 16.6 million tourists (12th most visited country in the world).

- **Case 1b** → *description of fictitious authoritarian state + info on organization of international football tournament*

... *Country Y* was selected to host the latest edition of one of the most popular international football competitions in the world. It registered a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators from all over the world, and it is estimated that as much as \$220 billion has been spent since being chosen to host the competition.

- **Case 2a** → *description of democratic western state*
Country X is a federal parliamentary republic with a population of 84.2 million. Its GDP per capita is US\$ 51,383 (#19 in the world, 2023). *Country X* is categorized as Free in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index's annual report. The index assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties around the world. *Country X* has a Power Distance Index (PDI) of 35. The PDI refers to the degree of inequality that exists between people with and without power. The index can take on a value between 1 and 120; high values indicate that a society accepts an unequal, hierarchical

distribution of power. In 2022, Country X counted 28.5 million tourists (8th most visited country in the world).

- **Case 2b** → *description of democratic western state + info on organization of international football event*
... *Country X* was selected to host the latest edition of one of the most popular international football competitions in the world. It registered a cumulative attendance of 3.4 million spectators from all over the world, and it is estimated that as much as \$7.8 billion has been for the arrangement of the competition.

The study used data from real-world countries to characterize the fictitious countries described in the scenarios. For the authoritarian state (Country Y), Saudi Arabia served as a reference, while data related to the international football competition referred to the 2022 Qatar World Cup. In contrast, the democratic state (Country X) was characterized using data from Germany, and the information about the international football competition pertained to the 2006 Germany World Cup.

Several metrics were chosen to describe these fictitious countries:

- **Government Type:** This information was presented first to the respondents as it's crucial for understanding the main focus of the study, which is the type of government in the described country.
- **GDP per Capita:** This metric provides insights into the living standards in the country and helps exclude concerns about the financial sustainability of organizing the international football competition.
- **Power Distance Index (PDI):** The PDI measures the acceptance of power and hierarchical differences in society. A higher PDI suggests a greater acceptance of authority and hierarchy. It was used as a proxy for identifying authoritarian traits in the described country.
- **Freedom in the World Index:** This index assesses political freedom and civil liberties within a country. It categorizes countries as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free based on a range of factors related to political rights and civil liberties.
- **International Tourist Arrivals:** This metric tracks the number of international visitors entering a country, indicating the country's appeal as a tourist destination. It was included to help respondents understand the international appeal of the described country.

These metrics were integrated into the descriptions of the fictitious countries to provide a comprehensive picture that respondents could use to form their perceptions of the proposed countries.

The survey used a scale to measure respondents' perceptions of the image of the described country. The scale was adapted from existing scales used to assess destination image and country image in previous research. The scale employed in this study had six dimensions to capture various aspects of a country's image influenced by the soft power associated with organizing a global football event. These dimensions included factors related to the organic and induced image of a country, as defined in prior research. The organic image arises from sources beyond tourism, such as geography literature and media, while the induced image can stem from tourism-specific sources like brochures or websites resulting from destination marketing efforts.

The scale aimed to measure not only the abstract perception of a country but also the tangible dimension related to respondents' intentions to visit or do business with that country. This was particularly relevant given the study's focus on the goals of using soft power to enhance a nation's brand and attractiveness to other countries and tourists.

The scale incorporated factors like attraction, enjoyment, economic conditions, political structure, environment, and labor, each with a set of items. Respondents rated their agreement with these items on a 5-point Likert scale (*Box 1*).

<i>Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)</i>
<p>Factor 1: Attraction</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ... has beautiful scenery.</i> 2) <i>Country ... has a good climate.</i> 3) <i>Country ... offers interesting cultural events.</i> 4) <i>Country ... offers interesting historical attractions.</i>
<p>Factor 2: Enjoyment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ... is a pleasing travel destination.</i> 2) <i>Country ... is an enjoyable travel destination.</i> 3) <i>Country ... is an exciting travel destination.</i> 4) <i>Country ... is a novel travel destination.</i>
<p>Factor 3: Economic conditions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ... is technologically very advanced.</i> 2) <i>Country ...'s economy is mostly industrial (not agricultural).</i> 3) <i>Country ...'s economy is very modern.</i>
<p>Factor 4: Political structure</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Country ...'s government/political system is very democratic.</i>

2) <i>Country ...</i> is a very peaceful country. 3) <i>Country ...</i> 's citizens have a great deal of freedom.
Factor 5: Environment 1) <i>Country ...</i> makes an aggressive effort to protect the environment. 2) <i>Country ...</i> maintains very high standards about the environment. 3) <i>Country ...</i> is very concerned about the environment.
Factor 6: Labor 1) Workplace conditions in <i>Country ...</i> are generally very safe. 2) <i>Country ...</i> is very considerate to its workers. 3) <i>Country ...</i> 's workers are generally very well treated.

Box 1 – The questions from the survey

The survey also collected demographic information about respondents' age and gender. For those presented with the scenario of the football tournament, the survey asked whether they considered themselves football fans.

Data from 185 respondents was collected, of which 48 did not complete it. Additionally, an attention test removed two responses, leaving a final sample of 135 respondents. Among these, 75 identified as male, 58 as female, one as non-binary, and one preferred not to specify. Respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 62, with an average age of 29.2.

The respondents were equally distributed across the four possible survey conditions. Case 1a was encountered by 27.4% of respondents, case 1b by 23.7%, case 2a by 25.2%, and case 2b by 23.7%.

The study assessed the validity and reliability of the scale used in the survey. Convergent validity, which examines whether the scale items measure the underlying construct (country image perception), was evaluated through a correlation analysis. The analysis found that all items had a sufficiently high correlation except for one item, item 4 from factor 2, which was subsequently removed from the scale.

Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which measures the internal consistency of a scale. The scale comprised 19 items across six dimensions. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.978, indicating high reliability. This resulted in the creation of a new variable called "Country Image Perception," computed as the mean of the responses to the 19 scale items.

The outcomes of hypothesis testing can be summarized as follows:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** It was tested whether respondents perceive democratic states more positively than authoritarian states in terms of country image perception. An independent-

samples t-test was conducted to compare the country image perception between two groups: case 1a (authoritarian state) and case 1b (democratic state). The results indicated a significant difference, with respondents perceiving democratic states more positively than authoritarian states.

- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** This hypothesis investigated whether the presence or absence of an international football competition moderated the relationship identified in H1. A two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the interaction effect of government type (authoritarian vs. democratic) and the organization of an international football competition (yes/no) on country image perception. The results (*Table 5*) supported H2, showing that European citizens perceive a better image of an authoritarian state that organizes an international football competition than an authoritarian state that does not. The effect was particularly pronounced in cases involving authoritarian states.

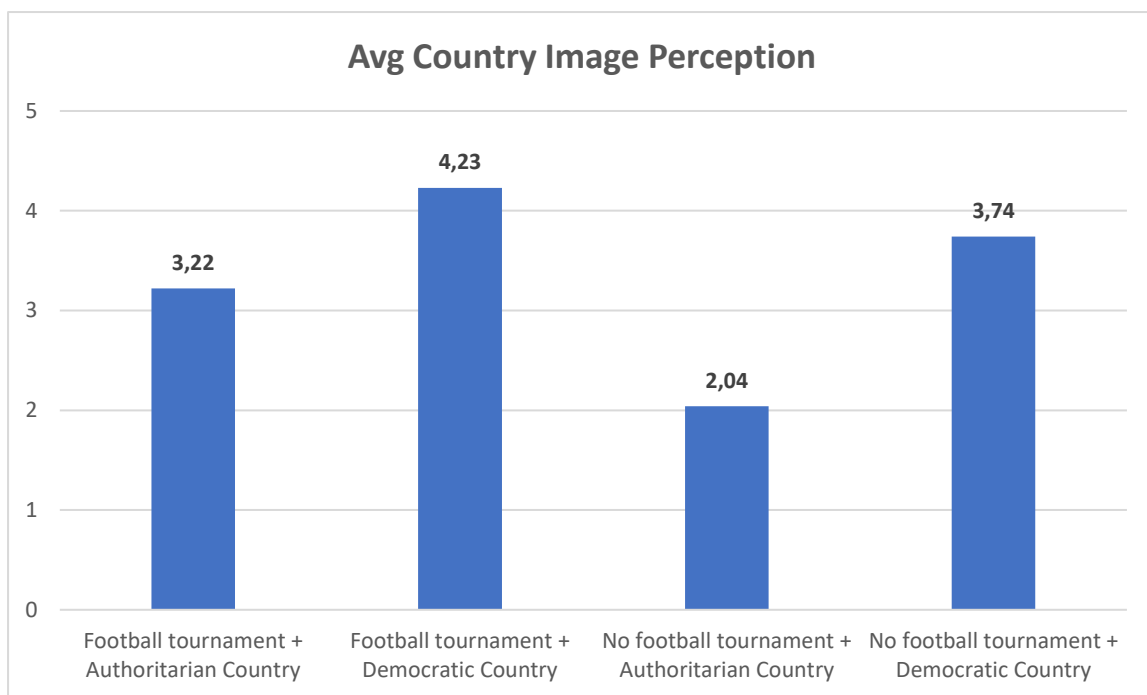


Table 5 – Average country image perception H2

- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The study also explored whether identification as a football fan moderates the relationship. Another two-way ANOVA was conducted, but this time on a subset of the data containing only cases involving the organization of the tournament (cases 1b and 2b). However, the results (*Table 6*) did not support H3, indicating that identification as a football fan or not did not significantly affect country image perception

between authoritarian and democratic states organizing international football competitions.

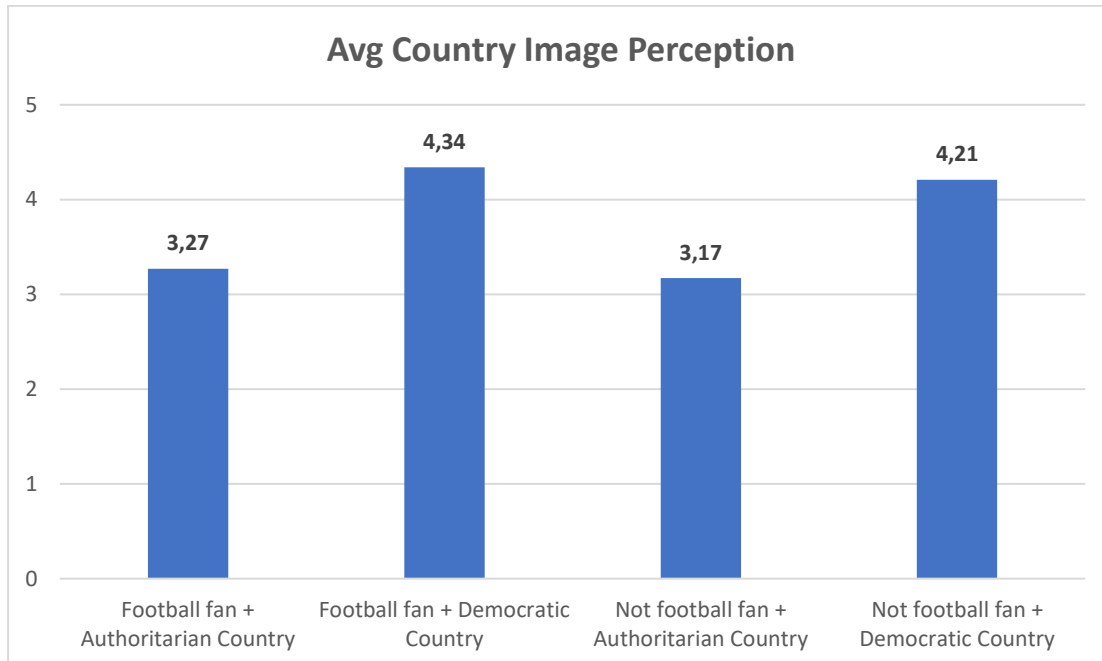


Table 6 – Average country image perception H3

Overall, the findings suggest that the presence of an international football competition can positively impact the image of both authoritarian and democratic states, with the effect being more pronounced for authoritarian states. However, being a football fan or not does not appear to significantly influence this perception.

- Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the potential influence of a major international football competition, exemplified by the FIFA World Cup, on the public's perception of the host country. Specifically, the focus of this inquiry centered on countries governed by authoritarian regimes. The designation of a state as authoritarian can be multifaceted and may encompass various distinct characteristics of the government or society that restrict the liberties of its citizens. In the context of this research, key metrics and indices chosen to delineate a government as authoritarian were the tolerance for power concentration and hierarchical distinctions, as well as the extent of political freedom and respect for civil liberties. Authoritarian states are often characterized by the concentration of power within the hands of a single leader or a select group, resulting in limited tolerance for dissenting voices

and political pluralism. Moreover, such states frequently exhibit pronounced hierarchical structures with restricted avenues for upward mobility and political engagement outside established power frameworks. Another facet considered was the curtailment of political freedoms, including freedom of expression, press, and assembly, which often prevails in authoritarian states. This suppression of opposing voices contributes to an environment marked by constrained political freedom, while civil liberties, such as the right to a fair trial and protection from unwarranted state surveillance, are typically restricted in authoritarian contexts, thereby affording citizens limited safeguard against state intrusion into their personal lives.

The examination in this study sought to discern the influence wielded by international football competitions on mitigating any negative sentiments associated with authoritarian states. These negative sentiments can stem from a rational assessment of a country's economic, political, and social dimensions, as well as the emotions that individuals associate with it.

Regarding the research model, the first hypothesis (H1) served as a foundational element, establishing the initial relationship between European citizens and authoritarian states. Following the acceptance of H1, which posited that the perception of an authoritarian state's image is less favorable than that of a democratic state, subsequent inquiry centered on whether a significant ameliorating effect could be detected when the authoritarian state hosted a major international football competition.

H2 was corroborated, elucidating the efforts undertaken by authoritarian states to host prominent global football events. Lastly, H3 was refuted, indicating that identification as a football fan or not does not substantially affect the country image perception of authoritarian or democratic states hosting international football competitions.

In summary, the study underscores the potential of major international football competitions, such as the FIFA World Cup, to reshape public perceptions of host countries, especially those under authoritarian rule. By hosting such events, these states can challenge negative stereotypes and imbue their image with positive emotions associated with the competition, thereby enhancing their international brand. Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup, for instance, adeptly leveraged cultural symbolism to associate itself with the positive emotions engendered by the event, thereby enhancing its international image.

Theoretical Contributions:

The research makes a significant contribution to the field of soft power and nation branding. It empirically demonstrates that hosting international football competitions can positively impact the image of authoritarian states among European citizens, adding to the theoretical discourse on how countries strategically use sports events as tools to shape their global image. The study also sheds light on how perceptions of authoritarian governments can be influenced by non-political factors like sports events. Moreover, by showing that hosting football competitions can improve the image of authoritarian states, the research highlights that authoritarian regimes are not solely viewed through a political lens but can also benefit from positive associations related to sports, revealing the mechanisms of covert sportswashing that enable authoritarian governments to thrive.

Managerial Implications:

The study offers insights for authoritarian states looking to enhance their global image, suggesting that hosting international football competitions can be considered as part of their nation branding strategy. This could help them appeal to a broader international audience and potentially mitigate negative perceptions, especially if they can manage and prevent backlash.

On a different note, investors and stakeholders involved in organizing international football competitions in countries with authoritarian regimes should be aware of the potential dual impact of their events. They should consider not only the economic gains from the event itself but also the potential positive image effects for the host country.

To conclude, European policymakers and diplomatic bodies can find these findings useful in shaping their engagement with authoritarian states. Understanding the potential soft power effects of international sporting events can inform diplomatic strategies and raise awareness of how awarding these events to autocratic countries might inadvertently encourage their normalization.

Limitations & Future Research Directions:

The study acknowledges limitations, particularly in terms of sample size and representativeness. With only 135 respondents, concerns about the adequacy and

representativeness of the sample are raised. Future research should aim to include respondents from more European countries to overcome this limitation. Moreover, the lack of incentives for respondents to complete the questionnaire resulted in 26% of unfinished surveys. Future research could benefit from additional quantitative analysis, such as focus groups, to elicit more accurate and sincere responses.

Concerns about the arbitrariness of the metrics and indexes used to categorize countries as authoritarian or democratic may be pointed out. Future research could explore different metrics for describing governments. Additionally, investigating the influence of social injustices in authoritarian states on respondents' perceptions could be valuable.

In addition, while the study has shown that authoritarian regimes can improve their image through hosting international football competitions, it hasn't delved into the mechanisms behind this dynamic. Future research could conduct mediating analyses to uncover the processes shaping respondents' perception of a country's image. Utilizing neuromarketing tools like fMRI or GSR measures could help track emotional responses and provide insights into this aspect.