


# The Impact of Major Sporting Events on Foreign Policy: Football and Diplomacy on the Global Stage

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This article explores the role of major international football events in shaping foreign policy through the lens of sports diplomacy. As a global phenomenon with a vast following, football serves as an effective non-traditional tool for diplomatic engagement, transcending cultural and political boundaries. The study employs a descriptive narrative review to examine key instances where football events, such as the FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship, have influenced bilateral and multilateral relations. The analysis highlights football's potential to project soft power, foster national pride, and facilitate dialogue among adversarial nations. Through various case studies, including the 1998 World Cup match between the United States and Iran and recent hosting examples like Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022, the research illustrates football's effectiveness in altering international perceptions and advancing diplomatic goals. Additionally, the review addresses the complexities and limitations of football diplomacy, noting that geopolitical tensions, media portrayal, and ethical concerns can impact its efficacy. Despite these challenges, football remains a unique vehicle for diplomacy, offering opportunities for cultural exchange and international cooperation. By synthesizing historical and contemporary sources, this article contributes to understanding how sports, particularly football, continue to influence foreign policy and international relations on the global stage.

**Keywords:** Sports diplomacy, football diplomacy, soft power, foreign policy.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of sports diplomacy has gained significant traction in international relations, serving as a potent non-traditional diplomatic tool that transcends boundaries and fosters connections between nations. As a prominent aspect of soft power, sports diplomacy harnesses the universal appeal of athletic events to influence international perceptions and build alliances without coercive force (Rofe, 2016). By providing a platform for countries to display their culture and values, sports events promote goodwill and

often pave the way for smoother diplomatic exchanges. In particular, football (soccer), given its vast international following and cultural influence, has become a notable medium through which countries engage in public diplomacy to project favorable national images and strengthen foreign relations (Biscaia et al., 2016). The relevance of sports diplomacy has expanded in recent years, highlighting its potential to navigate complex global issues while remaining adaptable to cultural and political contexts (Zákravský et al., 2021). This review seeks to explore the impact of major international football events on foreign policy,



examining how these events serve as conduits for diplomatic engagement and influence bilateral and multilateral relations. Central to this analysis is the question, "How do major football events influence diplomatic relations between nations?" This question guides an exploration of football's role in fostering alliances, enhancing national prestige, and sometimes alleviating tensions between conflicting states. In examining the dynamics of sports diplomacy, the review addresses key areas: football's capacity to build soft power, its ability to open dialogue among adversarial nations, and the impact of hosting large-scale events like the FIFA World Cup on a host nation's global reputation (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). While this study situates football within the broader context of sports diplomacy, football's unique global appeal and historical examples of its diplomatic influence justify its selection as a focused case study in this review.

Football holds a unique position in sports diplomacy due to its unparalleled popularity and the scale of events associated with it. Unlike other sports, football's international tournaments draw attention from a broad demographic and garner extensive media coverage, giving countries the opportunity to reach diverse global audiences (Elshaer, 2023). Hosting events like the FIFA World Cup or the UEFA European Championship allows nations to project a carefully crafted national image that can boost tourism, attract foreign investment, and improve international relations. In particular, countries with political or cultural controversies often use football to alter global perceptions, as seen with Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which offered an avenue to challenge stereotypes and assert the nation's modern identity (Maderer et al., 2016). Moreover, football's potential to influence national identity and unity strengthens its effectiveness in diplomacy, as showcased by international matches that often reflect or reshape public sentiment (Małczyński, 2021).

While other sports may serve diplomatic functions, football's global influence and cultural integration in various societies make it especially impactful. By analyzing major football events and their diplomatic outcomes, this review contributes to the understanding of how sports can be leveraged as a diplomatic tool on the global stage.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This narrative review adopts a descriptive analysis approach to examine the impact of major sporting events, particularly football tournaments, on foreign policy and international diplomacy. By analyzing historical and contemporary sources, this section clarifies the criteria and procedures used in source selection, the analytical framework for interpretation, and the materials reviewed to provide an in-depth understanding of the intersection between sports and diplomatic efforts.

A narrative review method was chosen for its suitability in synthesizing a diverse range of existing literature and case studies to capture the dynamic and interdisciplinary nature of sports diplomacy. The review does not seek to quantify or statistically analyze the impact of sporting events on diplomacy; instead, it aims to interpret and contextualize examples where football has played a role in international relations. The descriptive analysis method allows for thematic organization of information, facilitating a clear understanding of how and why major football events are used as diplomatic tools. Through qualitative interpretation of each case, this approach offers an informed perspective on the mechanisms by which sports influence foreign policy and public perception.

The materials for this review were selected based on their relevance, scholarly rigor, and direct relation to the themes of sports diplomacy, football events, and foreign policy. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, historical accounts, government publications, official reports from international sports organizations, and reputable media coverage. Studies were included if they focused on either historical events where football influenced international relations or modern instances where football events were strategically used in diplomacy. Sources addressing theoretical frameworks, such as soft power and public diplomacy theories, were prioritized to underpin the analysis with established concepts. For contemporary instances, reports and media sources from the last decade were primarily selected to ensure relevance to current diplomatic practices. All sources were obtained from established academic databases and repositories, ensuring that the materials align with the standards of reliability and academic credibility.

Data collection for this narrative review involved extensive literature search and data mining from multiple databases, including JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar, as well as sports-specific databases and archives such as FIFA's digital library. A systematic search strategy was used to locate articles and reports using keywords like "football diplomacy," "sports and foreign policy," "FIFA World Cup diplomacy," and "sports as soft power." To enhance data depth and contextual understanding, case studies on specific football events were extracted and analyzed through a comparative lens, examining both immediate and long-term impacts on diplomatic relations. The analytical framework for this review was guided by descriptive analysis principles, focusing on identifying patterns, recurring themes, and unique instances where football served as a diplomatic tool. The thematic analysis allowed the review to capture the nuances of each case and assess their impact within the broader spectrum of international relations.

The materials included historical accounts of notable instances where football events influenced diplomacy, such as the 1998 FIFA World Cup match between the United States and Iran, which fostered temporary goodwill amidst prolonged political tension. Additional materials covered recent tournaments, including Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022, focusing on how host nations utilized the events to shape international perceptions and improve foreign relations. Theoretical materials such as Joseph Nye's concept of soft power and contemporary interpretations of public diplomacy provided the conceptual foundation for analyzing these cases. Furthermore, media articles from reliable outlets, official statements from national governments and sports organizations, and expert analyses were incorporated to present a comprehensive overview of football's role in diplomacy. Combining primary historical data with secondary academic sources enabled the review to build a layered narrative that explores football's potential as a diplomatic medium while acknowledging its limitations and contextual challenges.

### 3. Literature Review

The existing literature on sports and diplomacy reveals the powerful role of sports, particularly football, in facilitating diplomatic relations and shaping foreign policy. Scholars have recognized sports as a tool for soft power, cultural exchange, and public diplomacy, with

football often serving as the centerpiece of these analyses due to its unmatched global popularity and symbolic influence. Football, unlike most other sports, carries a unifying capacity that transcends borders and often provides a neutral ground for otherwise politically tense relationships to flourish. For many countries, football is more than a game; it becomes a platform through which governments project positive national images, influence public opinion abroad, and foster diplomatic goodwill (Biscaia et al., 2016). In examining this phenomenon, researchers have employed theoretical frameworks such as soft power theory and public diplomacy, which offer a deeper understanding of how states leverage football to achieve diplomatic objectives.

One of the foundational theories in the analysis of sports diplomacy is soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye, which emphasizes the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion (Elshaer, 2023). This notion of soft power is particularly relevant to sports, as it captures the indirect influence that countries wield through the international appeal of their cultural assets, including athletic success and sportsmanship. Football, as a vehicle of soft power, provides a platform for nations to display their cultural values, social progress, and economic development. Major football events like the FIFA World Cup and regional tournaments have become significant avenues for countries to strengthen their soft power. By hosting these events, countries not only boost their visibility on the world stage but also foster a sense of unity and pride domestically, contributing to both internal cohesion and external appeal (Rofe, 2016). For instance, South Korea and Japan's joint hosting of the 2002 World Cup was a landmark in sports diplomacy, as it highlighted their economic progress and cultural modernity, enhancing their soft power in Asia and beyond (Kim, 2017).

Public diplomacy, a related framework, further enriches the understanding of sports as a diplomatic tool. Public diplomacy encompasses efforts by governments to engage with foreign publics, promote their national interests, and build mutual understanding. In this context, sports are used not only to influence foreign governments but to reach broader audiences and shape public opinion globally (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). Football, with its broad fanbase, provides a powerful

platform for public diplomacy as it resonates with people across diverse cultures and socio-political backgrounds. This approach is particularly evident when examining football matches between nations with complex diplomatic relationships, where the games serve as a conduit for communication and empathy-building among populations. For example, the historic 1998 FIFA World Cup match between the United States and Iran provided a rare moment of direct interaction and goodwill between two otherwise hostile nations, symbolizing the potential of football to foster public diplomacy (Rofe, 2016). In such cases, football transcends the political sphere to become a medium through which countries can express solidarity, encourage peace, and mitigate tensions.

In addition to these core theoretical approaches, the literature on sports diplomacy also highlights the symbolic and emotional impact of football on national identity, which is critical to understanding its role in diplomacy. Football has a unique capacity to embody a nation's identity and pride, serving as a potent tool for constructing and promoting national narratives. Scholars have noted that international matches often reflect broader geopolitical tensions, where victories or defeats on the pitch symbolize more than athletic success or failure; they signify national strength, resilience, and unity (Małczyński, 2021). In countries with deeply rooted football cultures, the sport becomes an extension of national identity and a source of pride for citizens. Consequently, governments can use football victories or high-profile hosting opportunities to instill patriotism and bolster the national image abroad. This dynamic is particularly evident in cases where host countries use the global stage of football events to challenge negative stereotypes and project a modern, progressive image, as seen in Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Elshaer, 2023). This aspect of sports diplomacy aligns with what Hocking (2004) describes as privatized diplomacy, where non-state actors, such as athletes and teams, play a role in representing national interests.

However, despite the strong theoretical grounding and significant case studies on football diplomacy, there are noticeable gaps in the literature that warrant further exploration. One such gap is the lack of empirical analysis on the long-term impacts of football-related diplomatic efforts. While researchers have explored immediate diplomatic outcomes, such as the temporary goodwill

fostered by matches between rival countries, there is limited insight into whether these interactions yield sustainable diplomatic benefits. Much of the existing research remains anecdotal, relying on high-profile events or singular instances of sports diplomacy to draw broader conclusions. More systematic, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate whether football-driven diplomatic gestures translate into enduring improvements in intergovernmental relations (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

Another gap in the literature concerns the role of digital diplomacy in sports diplomacy, particularly as football becomes increasingly intertwined with digital media. The digital age has introduced new ways for states to leverage football's popularity to reach foreign audiences, as social media platforms and streaming services extend the reach of football events far beyond traditional broadcasting (Hayden, 2018). However, there is limited research exploring how governments and sports organizations employ digital platforms to enhance football's diplomatic impact. Digital diplomacy, or the use of internet-based public diplomacy, represents an emerging field that could deepen the reach of football diplomacy, allowing states to engage directly with foreign publics and bypass traditional diplomatic channels (Mazumdar, 2021). In this context, digital platforms enable countries to shape narratives, counter misinformation, and build relationships in real time. The intersection of digital and sports diplomacy, particularly in relation to football, remains an underexplored area that could reveal new strategies for international engagement.

Moreover, the existing literature often focuses predominantly on state actors, such as national governments and sports federations, as the primary agents of sports diplomacy. This approach overlooks the increasing influence of non-state actors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and even individual athletes, who play crucial roles in the global football ecosystem. Football clubs and athletes frequently engage in philanthropic and diplomatic activities that impact international perceptions and foster goodwill. For instance, globally popular clubs and players, like those in the English Premier League, regularly participate in charity events, engage in social causes, and communicate directly with international audiences through social media (Cicut et

al, 2017). These actions contribute to the positive image of their home countries and influence international attitudes. Expanding the focus to include these non-state actors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how football diplomacy operates across various levels of influence, thereby enriching the current theoretical frameworks.

Additionally, while much of the literature on sports diplomacy emphasizes football's positive impact, few studies delve into the limitations and potential negative consequences of using football as a diplomatic tool. The assumption that football can universally promote goodwill and understanding ignores the complexities of international politics and the risk of unintended diplomatic fallout. For example, instances where football rivalries exacerbate nationalistic tensions or reignite historical animosities illustrate that football diplomacy can sometimes have adverse effects (Małczyński, 2021). Additionally, countries hosting major football events occasionally face criticism and diplomatic challenges, such as human rights issues and environmental concerns, which can overshadow the intended diplomatic benefits (Blake & Spies, 2020). A more balanced exploration of both the opportunities and limitations of football as a diplomatic tool would provide a nuanced perspective on its role in foreign policy, addressing the conditions under which football diplomacy is most effective.

The literature on sports diplomacy and football also often lacks a critical perspective on how geopolitical power dynamics influence football's diplomatic outcomes. Football diplomacy may be more accessible and effective for developed nations with significant resources and global influence, while smaller or less affluent countries may struggle to leverage football on the same scale. The disparity in access to major events like the FIFA World Cup, where hosting is often limited to countries with substantial infrastructure and economic capacity, highlights inequalities that can influence the effectiveness of football diplomacy (Rofe, 2016). Furthermore, certain countries may encounter cultural or political biases that limit their ability to benefit from football diplomacy in the same way as Western or economically powerful nations. Investigating the influence of power asymmetries in sports diplomacy could reveal insights into the challenges faced by less

influential countries in gaining equal diplomatic traction through football.

In light of these gaps, this review aims to contribute new insights by focusing on the underexplored dimensions of football diplomacy, such as its digital expansion, the role of non-state actors, and the influence of geopolitical power imbalances. This approach will provide a more holistic understanding of football's potential and limitations as a tool for diplomacy. By examining both successful and challenging cases of football diplomacy, this review will offer a balanced view of how football events can be strategically utilized to foster international cooperation, promote cultural understanding, and enhance foreign policy objectives.

Overall, the literature highlights football's distinct capacity to serve as a diplomatic medium, drawing on theories of soft power, public diplomacy, and national identity. Football's widespread appeal and symbolic resonance position it uniquely in the realm of sports diplomacy, enabling nations to communicate messages, forge connections, and influence global perceptions. However, there remains considerable room for further exploration, particularly in understanding how digital platforms, non-state actors, and power dynamics shape the outcomes of football diplomacy. By addressing these gaps, this review will advance the understanding of football's impact on foreign policy, offering insights that can guide both scholars and policymakers in leveraging sports for diplomatic engagement on the global stage.

#### 4. Historical Context: Football and Diplomacy

The historical use of football as a tool for diplomacy showcases the sport's unique capacity to bridge divides, foster communication, and, at times, mediate peace between nations. As a global phenomenon, football has played a diplomatic role in several key events, demonstrating that sports can indeed operate as a neutral platform for engagement, even among adversaries. The sport's universality and appeal across cultural, ethnic, and national lines have allowed it to transcend political barriers, creating a shared language that facilitates diplomatic exchanges. This section explores the historical context of football's role in diplomacy, highlighting notable instances such as the 1998 Iran-U.S. World Cup match and drawing parallels with other sports-related diplomatic achievements, such as the renowned "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" between the

United States and China in the 1970s. Through these examples, football's impact on diplomacy is revealed as a dynamic and evolving force, one that countries continue to leverage to project soft power, cultivate peace, and influence international relations.

One of the most widely discussed cases of football diplomacy in recent history occurred during the 1998 FIFA World Cup, when the national teams of Iran and the United States faced each other amidst strained diplomatic relations. The geopolitical backdrop of this match, held in Lyon, France, was marked by decades of tension between the two nations following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. This football match was significant not just as a sporting event, but as a rare moment of direct interaction between the two countries, symbolizing the potential for sports to foster dialogue even under politically challenging circumstances (Rofe, 2016). Prior to the game, Iranian and American players exchanged flowers and handshakes, actions laden with symbolic significance that underscored mutual respect and goodwill, despite the political animosities between their governments. The match ended in a 2-1 victory for Iran, yet the game's diplomatic impact extended far beyond the final score, as it provided an opportunity for both nations to communicate through gestures of peace rather than the rhetoric of conflict (Beacom & Brittain, 2016).

The 1998 Iran-U.S. match bears some resemblance to the "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" that preceded it by nearly three decades, where the United States and China leveraged the shared interest in table tennis to initiate diplomatic contact after years of political isolation. In the early 1970s, American and Chinese athletes exchanged visits in a series of carefully orchestrated events, culminating in President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. Ping-Pong Diplomacy succeeded in opening diplomatic channels between two ideologically opposed nations, laying the groundwork for normalized relations. This phenomenon of sports diplomacy demonstrates that sports—be it football or table tennis—hold a unique power to bridge divides, particularly when official diplomatic routes are unavailable or undesirable (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Similar to Ping-Pong Diplomacy, the 1998 Iran-U.S. football match allowed both governments to signal openness to dialogue, albeit

through the medium of an international football stage rather than formal diplomatic talks.

Another historical example of football diplomacy can be seen in the case of the "Football War" between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, which, although initially exacerbating conflict, ultimately highlighted football's central role in international relations. The war was ignited following a series of highly charged World Cup qualifying matches between the two nations, which inflamed existing socio-political tensions stemming from disputes over land and immigration. The rivalry on the field served as a catalyst for a four-day military conflict, but the events that followed illustrated how international sports organizations, particularly FIFA, could work alongside governments to mediate peace efforts. While this example reflects the complexity of football diplomacy, where nationalistic fervor associated with the sport can sometimes escalate tensions, it also underscores the importance of international frameworks and governing bodies in using football to restore order and encourage diplomatic dialogue. Over time, football played a role in reconciliation efforts between El Salvador and Honduras, proving that sports can act as both a symbol of conflict and a platform for peace (Biscaia et al., 2016).

The use of football in diplomacy is further demonstrated by the case of South Korea and Japan's co-hosting of the 2002 FIFA World Cup. This joint event was a groundbreaking achievement for both countries, given the historical hostilities rooted in Japan's colonial occupation of Korea in the early 20th century. The tournament required close collaboration between the two nations, both in terms of logistical coordination and diplomatic engagement. The shared responsibility of hosting the World Cup offered a rare opportunity for the two governments to set aside historical grievances and work together to present a unified front on the global stage. This event not only improved bilateral relations but also projected a new image of East Asian unity to the world, an important step toward reconciling their shared history and building mutual trust. The 2002 World Cup demonstrated how the mutual hosting of football events could serve as a diplomatic tool that transcends past conflicts, allowing nations to reframe their relationships within a positive, cooperative context (Kim, 2017).

The symbolic nature of football in diplomacy is not limited to individual matches or tournaments; entire

leagues and football clubs have also played significant roles in fostering international understanding. For example, the British Premier League's international popularity has served as an informal extension of British soft power, promoting British culture and values worldwide (Rofe, 2016). Through broadcasting deals, charity initiatives, and global fan engagement, clubs within the Premier League, such as Manchester United and Liverpool, have built strong followings around the world, enhancing Britain's cultural influence. This use of football as soft power aligns with the principles of public diplomacy, wherein sports provide a channel for nations to reach foreign audiences directly, bypassing governmental channels. In this way, football clubs can act as unofficial ambassadors of their home countries, fostering international goodwill and positive perceptions that extend beyond the football pitch.

In Latin America, football has similarly operated as a medium for diplomatic relations, particularly in promoting regional solidarity and cooperation. For instance, the Copa América, the oldest international continental football competition, has often served as a forum for promoting unity among Latin American nations. In times of political discord, the tournament provides a neutral ground where countries can interact and celebrate shared cultural values through the sport. Football events like Copa América allow Latin American nations to reinforce their regional identity and solidarity, positioning the sport as a cultural bridge that can help alleviate tensions and encourage collaboration (Quin & Vonnard, 2015). The shared passion for football across Latin America fosters a sense of collective identity, reminding participating nations of their commonalities even amid political differences. This example illustrates the regional role that football diplomacy can play, strengthening relationships within a geographic area through shared cultural and sporting values.

In addition to facilitating unity within regions, football diplomacy has also been instrumental in promoting peace between countries with historical conflicts. The Ivory Coast provides a notable example, where football helped unite a nation divided by civil war. In 2005, as the Ivorian national team qualified for the World Cup, the team captain, Didier Drogba, used the opportunity to call for peace in a televised message, appealing to both sides of the conflict to end the violence. His message resonated deeply, and football became a symbol of hope and unity

in a country fractured along political and ethnic lines. The "Drogba Diplomacy" exemplifies how prominent football figures can use their influence to inspire reconciliation, underscoring the role of athletes as informal diplomats who, through their platform, can advocate for peace and national unity (Rofe, 2016). This case illustrates football's potential to foster cohesion within nations by transcending divisions and uniting people under a shared identity, particularly in contexts where traditional diplomacy may be ineffective.

Despite these successes, football diplomacy is not without challenges and controversies. Football's popularity and ability to unify also carry the risk of inflaming nationalistic sentiment, as seen in cases where competitive fervor translates into political hostility. In the Balkans, for example, tensions between Croatia and Serbia often find expression in football matches, where the sport becomes a stage for political disputes and displays of national pride. Such examples highlight the dual nature of football diplomacy, where the sport can serve as both a tool for peace and a catalyst for conflict (Małczyński, 2021). International organizations, such as FIFA and UEFA, have worked to mitigate these risks by promoting fair play and using their influence to advocate for peace, although their efforts are not always successful in containing nationalistic sentiments. This complex interplay of unity and division demonstrates that while football has the power to bridge divides, it also has the potential to deepen them, depending on the broader political context and the motivations of those involved.

The historical context of football and diplomacy underscores that the sport has long been leveraged by countries to project soft power, promote national unity, and bridge divides. From individual matches like the 1998 Iran-U.S. World Cup game to international tournaments and influential players like Didier Drogba, football offers a distinct avenue for diplomatic engagement that combines cultural influence with the symbolic power of sports. While it cannot resolve every diplomatic impasse, football has demonstrated a unique ability to foster dialogue, reshape perceptions, and encourage cooperation among nations. As the world continues to globalize, the role of football diplomacy is likely to expand, offering new opportunities for countries to connect, reconcile, and build mutual understanding on the global stage. This historical analysis provides a foundation for further research into

how football might continue to shape international relations, with potential implications for peacebuilding, cultural diplomacy, and global cooperation in the years to come.

### 5. Football as a Diplomatic Tool in Modern International Relations

Football's role as a diplomatic tool has evolved in recent years, gaining renewed significance as host countries of major events like the FIFA World Cup use these platforms to project national identities, foster international goodwill, and shape global perceptions. The 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar exemplify how nations strategically employ football to craft specific international images, counteract existing narratives, and engage with the global community. These events highlight the evolving nature of football diplomacy, where soft power and public diplomacy principles merge to create a space in which countries, regardless of political tensions or controversies, can establish dialogues, enhance relations, and leverage football's universal appeal to build more favorable images on the world stage.

The 2018 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Russia, represented one of the clearest examples of a nation utilizing football to counter global narratives and promote a desired image. Russia's image leading up to the tournament was strained due to various geopolitical controversies, including its role in the Ukrainian conflict, accusations of election interference, and criticism of human rights practices. The World Cup offered a unique platform for Russia to redefine its global reputation, presenting a more welcoming, modernized, and culturally rich image. The Russian government invested extensively in infrastructure, renovated cities, and implemented policies to ensure a safe, visitor-friendly environment during the tournament, showcasing itself as a capable and attractive destination for tourism and international collaboration. This effort aligns with the concept of public diplomacy, where states engage in activities that appeal to foreign publics to reshape perceptions and cultivate international favor (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). For Russia, the World Cup was a calculated attempt to shift focus away from political controversies, reframe its global identity, and encourage direct engagement with visitors from across the world (Rofe, 2016).

The World Cup's success in terms of visitor satisfaction, smooth operations, and an overall positive atmosphere was widely documented in the media, which portrayed Russia as an efficient and hospitable host. In doing so, Russia engaged in a form of "event diplomacy," where the event's impact extended beyond sports to influence public opinion globally. The visibility of diverse fans and international visitors experiencing Russian culture allowed the country to project itself as more inclusive and open than its political image suggested. Russia's use of the 2018 World Cup exemplifies how football serves as a diplomatic tool that, through careful planning and media management, can counteract negative global perceptions and promote an alternative narrative, strengthening the nation's soft power (Kim, 2017). Although the political and diplomatic issues facing Russia remain complex, the World Cup illustrated how sporting events can serve as windows of opportunity for states seeking to reshape their reputations and engage more positively with the international community.

Similarly, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar provided the small Gulf state an unprecedented opportunity to use football diplomacy to bolster its international image, foster global connections, and address cultural misconceptions. As the first Middle Eastern country to host the World Cup, Qatar faced significant scrutiny and criticism, particularly concerning its labor practices, human rights record, and environmental impact. Hosting the World Cup was part of Qatar's long-term vision, known as Qatar National Vision 2030, to diversify its economy, reduce dependence on oil, and develop as a global center for tourism, culture, and sports. This aligns with the concept of soft power, where states attract international attention and shape perceptions through positive engagement rather than coercive tactics (Elshaer, 2023). For Qatar, football provided a means to reach a broad global audience, showcase its development, and establish itself as a key player on the international stage.

Qatar's extensive investments in infrastructure and state-of-the-art stadiums demonstrated the country's commitment to hosting a successful World Cup and positioned it as a leader in sports infrastructure and event management. The tournament became a platform for Qatar to demonstrate its capability and commitment to modernization, while also fostering greater understanding of its cultural values and Islamic heritage.



Qatar organized various cultural events, exhibitions, and initiatives to introduce global visitors to Arab and Islamic culture, aiming to bridge cultural gaps and counter prevailing stereotypes (Elshaer, 2023). By using football to create intercultural exchanges, Qatar employed a strategy aligned with public diplomacy, fostering connections with international visitors and media to reshape perceptions of the Gulf region as a whole. This diplomatic approach reflects the understanding that sports can serve as platforms not just for competition but for intercultural dialogue, fostering a more nuanced global perspective of the host nation.

The diplomatic implications of the Qatar 2022 World Cup also extended beyond cultural diplomacy to regional relations. For Qatar, which faced a regional blockade led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt from 2017 to early 2021, the World Cup offered a chance to signal openness and willingness to rebuild ties. Hosting the World Cup required regional collaboration, including air travel logistics and accommodation support from neighboring countries. The lifting of the blockade shortly before the World Cup allowed Qatar to reintegrate its regional relationships, showing the role of sports diplomacy in facilitating rapprochement. Qatar's interactions with its neighbors during the World Cup highlighted how football can foster regional cooperation and encourage reconciliation even after political crises. This example underscores football's potential to transcend political tensions, fostering direct connections and collaboration among countries in ways that formal diplomacy sometimes cannot achieve (Beacom & Brittain, 2016).

Beyond these examples, football diplomacy has also shown promise in normalizing relations between historically adversarial countries by creating opportunities for symbolic gestures, mutual respect, and constructive engagement. Football events provide a platform where rival states can interact in a non-political setting, allowing gestures of goodwill to substitute for formal diplomatic exchanges. This diplomatic role of football is evident in instances like the match between North and South Korea during the 2018 Asian Games, where both countries fielded a unified team. This act of solidarity through football resonated globally as a symbol of hope for improved relations, even as political negotiations between the two governments remained complex. Such instances of football diplomacy

underscore the sport's role as a neutral ground where adversarial nations can temporarily set aside political issues and engage on a shared platform, promoting mutual respect and trust (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

Football diplomacy has also become an integral part of broader public diplomacy strategies for many nations, as seen in the global outreach efforts of popular leagues and clubs. The English Premier League, for example, serves as an informal channel of British public diplomacy, reaching millions of viewers worldwide through broadcasts, youth development programs, and fan engagement initiatives. Through the global appeal of its football clubs, the United Kingdom effectively exports British culture and values, reinforcing soft power and fostering goodwill across diverse populations. The Premier League's charity work, community programs, and international partnerships illustrate how football clubs and leagues contribute to a nation's diplomatic efforts by strengthening connections with international audiences, particularly among youth (Cicut et al., 2017). Football's integration into public diplomacy reflects its power to create emotional connections, reinforce cultural ties, and promote positive international relations beyond government-driven initiatives.

However, while football diplomacy has demonstrated significant potential in recent years, it is not without limitations. Hosting major events like the World Cup often brings increased scrutiny, with host nations facing criticism related to human rights, environmental sustainability, and ethical concerns. Both Russia and Qatar faced international criticism regarding their treatment of migrant workers, limitations on freedom of expression, and labor rights violations. These issues highlight the complexities of using football for diplomacy, as the positive effects of soft power and public diplomacy are sometimes counterbalanced by controversy and criticism. Critics argue that sports diplomacy should be accompanied by genuine political reforms rather than being used solely as a tool to deflect criticism or project an artificial image (Blake & Spies, 2020). These limitations point to a growing need for transparency, accountability, and ethical considerations in football diplomacy, especially for nations seeking to leverage football to shape global perceptions.

In addition to ethical concerns, football diplomacy can sometimes have unintended diplomatic consequences. For instance, during Russia's World Cup, the inclusion of

Crimea as part of Russia in tournament-related maps and advertisements sparked outrage in Ukraine and the international community, highlighting how geopolitical issues can complicate football's role as a diplomatic tool. Such incidents reveal that while football can promote unity and dialogue, it can also reignite historical grievances or provoke diplomatic tensions. The diplomatic complexities of football highlight the delicate balance that nations must maintain when using sports for foreign policy objectives. Football diplomacy, while powerful, requires careful planning and sensitivity to political contexts to ensure that it fosters positive engagement rather than exacerbating existing divides (Małczyński, 2021).

Overall, football has proven to be an effective diplomatic tool in modern international relations, facilitating engagement, promoting cultural understanding, and contributing to a country's soft power. Recent events like the FIFA World Cups in Russia and Qatar illustrate how nations use football diplomacy to enhance their global image, foster intercultural dialogue, and project an image of openness and modernization. By creating platforms for direct public engagement, football diplomacy enables countries to reach international audiences beyond traditional government channels, promoting more nuanced, people-to-people connections. However, football diplomacy also poses challenges, particularly as the ethics of hosting practices and geopolitical complexities come under increasing scrutiny. Moving forward, football diplomacy will likely continue to evolve, requiring host nations and international organizations to balance the benefits of global engagement with the ethical and political responsibilities of representing a global sport.

In sum, football diplomacy in the modern era has become a sophisticated tool in international relations, reflecting the convergence of soft power, public diplomacy, and intercultural engagement. Through thoughtful application and careful management, football has the potential to advance diplomatic goals, normalize relations between adversarial nations, and foster a more interconnected global community. While not without its limitations, football diplomacy offers valuable insights into how sports can contribute to a world where shared passions bring nations closer, offering hope and possibilities for positive change amid political complexities.

## 6. Media Influence and Public Perception

Media coverage has always played a central role in shaping public perception of international football events, a phenomenon that holds significant implications for diplomatic relationships and foreign policy narratives. Traditional media outlets, such as television networks, newspapers, and radio, have historically been powerful tools for disseminating images and narratives surrounding major football events. The influence of the media in shaping the public's understanding of such events cannot be underestimated, as it often crafts specific images of host countries, national teams, and even individual players. By curating particular aspects of the event—such as the organization, fan experiences, and interactions among different nationalities—media coverage builds or diminishes the reputation of nations on the global stage (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). In an era marked by increasing digitalization, social media has joined traditional outlets to further amplify these narratives, providing unprecedented opportunities for countries to project images, communicate directly with international audiences, and influence public perception on a massive scale.

Traditional media coverage of major football events often works as a form of public diplomacy, which allows host nations to curate and promote an image that resonates globally. By highlighting certain aspects of a country's culture, infrastructure, and hospitality, media portrayals during events such as the FIFA World Cup can enhance a country's soft power. During the 2018 World Cup in Russia, for instance, the media played an essential role in shaping international perspectives on the host country. By emphasizing Russia's hospitality, cultural heritage, and advanced infrastructure, media coverage helped Russia counteract its controversial political image and assert itself as an attractive destination for international visitors. Reports focused on the positive experiences of fans and the seamless organization of the event contributed to a more favorable view of Russia, especially in Western media, which had often emphasized political controversies leading up to the tournament (Rofe, 2016). The extensive and generally positive media coverage during the World Cup demonstrated the power of traditional media in reshaping international opinion, providing an example of

how countries can leverage sports diplomacy through favorable narratives in the press.

However, while traditional media have long served as gatekeepers of information, social media has fundamentally transformed how football diplomacy reaches global audiences. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provide a direct, interactive means of engagement, allowing users to share their experiences, opinions, and reactions in real time. This shift enables countries to engage in what scholars term “digital diplomacy” or “e-diplomacy,” where states communicate directly with the public rather than through mediated or government-sanctioned channels (Mazumdar, 2021). By bypassing traditional media, social media allows nations to engage with audiences unfiltered, granting them more control over how they are perceived. During the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, for example, the Qatari government actively used social media platforms to highlight the country’s cultural events, promote intercultural understanding, and respond to criticisms related to human rights concerns. Qatar’s digital engagement strategy aimed to directly address the controversies surrounding the event, positioning the country as a progressive and inclusive destination on a global scale (Elshaer, 2023). By facilitating direct engagement with fans and critics alike, social media amplified Qatar’s efforts to use the World Cup as a platform for positive public diplomacy, demonstrating how digital diplomacy enables host countries to shape foreign perceptions in ways that traditional media alone cannot achieve.

The influence of social media on football diplomacy extends beyond the host country, as it enables fans, players, and international organizations to participate actively in shaping narratives. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have become public spaces where users from around the world share their opinions, personal experiences, and national pride during major football events. These platforms enable fans to feel part of a global community, fostering cross-cultural understanding and engagement even among nations with strained diplomatic relations. When the 2018 World Cup took place in Russia, for example, fans from various countries used social media to share images, videos, and stories of their interactions with Russians, counteracting preconceived notions and promoting mutual understanding (Kim, 2017). Through social

media, fans became informal ambassadors, promoting narratives that often diverged from politically charged media portrayals. This grassroots participation underscores social media’s role in sports diplomacy by amplifying positive interactions and fostering dialogue between diverse national communities.

Moreover, social media has allowed individual players to become influential figures in sports diplomacy, amplifying their voices and messages across national borders. High-profile athletes with large followings, such as Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Didier Drogba, use platforms like Instagram and Twitter to engage directly with fans and promote messages of peace, unity, and social responsibility. During the 2018 World Cup, for example, players often used their social media platforms to advocate for tolerance and respect, sharing moments of camaraderie with players from rival teams. Such acts of digital diplomacy by athletes reinforce the notion of sports as a unifying force, where individual players act as informal ambassadors, promoting values of unity and respect beyond the football field. These actions are significant, as they underscore how players can leverage their influence to promote positive diplomatic messages, shaping how their home countries and foreign relations are perceived internationally (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). While social media has democratized access to information and amplified the influence of sports diplomacy, it has also introduced new challenges, particularly in relation to misinformation and propaganda. The rapid spread of content on social media platforms can create opportunities for host nations to project carefully curated images, but it also allows detractors to spread negative narratives or exaggerate controversies. Leading up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, social media became a battleground where supporters and critics of Qatar’s hosting competed to influence public perception. While the Qatari government shared content showcasing the country’s rich cultural heritage and hospitality, critics used the same platforms to highlight labor rights abuses, environmental concerns, and restrictions on freedom of expression. This polarized discourse illustrated the double-edged nature of social media in sports diplomacy, where the very platforms that allow countries to project positive images can also amplify criticism, complicating the diplomatic objectives of the event (Blake & Spies, 2020). This dynamic underscores the importance of

strategic communication and media literacy, as social media can influence foreign policy narratives both positively and negatively, depending on how information is presented and consumed.

Social media's impact on football diplomacy also extends to the post-event period, where public perception continues to shape diplomatic relations. Major football events like the FIFA World Cup leave a lasting impression, and how these events are remembered can influence international perceptions long after the final match has been played. Social media platforms often serve as archives of these experiences, allowing users to revisit and share memories, which helps maintain the diplomatic influence of the event over time. For instance, the hashtag #WorldCupRussia2018 remains active years after the event, as fans share memories, photos, and stories that continue to shape perceptions of Russia as a capable and welcoming host. This post-event legacy of social media engagement highlights how digital platforms can sustain the diplomatic influence of football, extending its impact on international relations well beyond the official duration of the tournament (Rofe, 2016).

The role of social media in shaping foreign policy narratives through football diplomacy is particularly evident in the reactions of governments and international organizations to viral moments during major events. When viral incidents capture global attention, they can influence diplomatic stances, encourage policy changes, or prompt international discourse on relevant issues. In 2022, for example, social media was instrumental in raising awareness about labor rights and working conditions in Qatar, sparking international dialogue and pressure on both the Qatari government and FIFA to address these concerns. Such incidents reveal how social media can serve as a catalyst for change, where public opinion—mobilized through viral content—can influence foreign policy agendas and pressure governments to respond to global concerns. Social media, therefore, has not only amplified the reach of football diplomacy but also empowered citizens and advocacy groups to shape foreign policy narratives, democratizing the influence of sports on international relations (Mazumdar, 2021).

The evolving role of media, particularly social media, in football diplomacy represents a fundamental shift in how nations communicate, build reputations, and

engage in international relations. In a world increasingly dominated by digital interactions, the capacity of social media to shape narratives, foster dialogue, and influence public opinion positions it as a crucial component of modern sports diplomacy. As governments and football organizations become more adept at using digital platforms, they gain access to a global audience that can be reached in real time, allowing for more dynamic and interactive forms of engagement. However, this newfound influence also requires a sophisticated approach to managing content and addressing criticism, as the same tools that enhance diplomatic engagement also expose host nations to heightened scrutiny and potential backlash.

In sum, media coverage, both traditional and digital, plays an indispensable role in shaping public perception of football events and influencing diplomatic relationships. Social media has expanded the scope of football diplomacy, enabling real-time engagement, amplifying athlete voices, and fostering a sense of global community that transcends political boundaries. Yet, as countries leverage these platforms for public diplomacy, they must navigate the challenges of maintaining positive narratives amid global scrutiny and competing narratives. Football diplomacy in the digital age thus requires a careful balance between projecting favorable images and addressing the ethical and political complexities that arise when global audiences are more connected and informed than ever before. As the role of media in sports diplomacy continues to evolve, future events will likely reveal even more nuanced ways in which football can shape international relations, building bridges and fostering understanding through the power of both sport and social media.

## 7. Challenges and Recommendation

While football has demonstrated significant potential as a diplomatic tool, its limitations and challenges in bridging divides reveal a more complex picture. In some cases, rather than fostering unity, football has exacerbated existing tensions or even ignited conflicts. One prominent example is the "Football War" between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, where a series of World Cup qualifiers between the two nations inflamed socio-political tensions and escalated into military conflict. Although football acted as the immediate trigger, underlying issues related to land, migration, and national

pride were the primary drivers. This event highlighted football's limited ability to resolve deep-seated political grievances and underscored how nationalist sentiments surrounding the sport can intensify conflict rather than promote peace (Rofe, 2016). In such cases, football's role as a unifying force is overshadowed by its potential to reignite historical tensions, suggesting that while sports can serve as a tool for peace, they are equally vulnerable to exploitation for political ends.

Football's limitations as a diplomatic tool are also evident in cases where cultural differences inhibit the sport's universal appeal. Despite football's global popularity, its role in diplomacy may be limited in regions where the sport does not hold significant cultural value. For instance, while football is widely celebrated in Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa, its influence is comparatively weaker in North America and some Asian countries, where other sports, such as basketball, baseball, or cricket, dominate. These cultural differences can limit football's diplomatic reach, as the sport may not resonate with audiences in regions where it lacks deep cultural roots (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Consequently, relying exclusively on football for diplomatic outreach in such areas may fail to achieve the intended soft power outcomes, as the audience may not fully engage with the sport's diplomatic messages. This cultural constraint suggests that while football diplomacy has broad potential, it may require adaptation to align with regional preferences and cultural contexts.

Political constraints further complicate the effectiveness of football as a diplomatic tool. In countries with authoritarian regimes or severe restrictions on freedom of expression, the use of football as a platform for diplomacy is often tightly controlled, limiting its capacity to foster genuine cross-cultural dialogue. Host nations may carefully curate the image they wish to project, as seen in Russia's 2018 World Cup and Qatar's 2022 World Cup, where government narratives sought to emphasize hospitality and modernization while downplaying criticism of human rights practices. Although these events succeeded in showcasing the countries' organizational abilities and promoting tourism, they also faced international scrutiny regarding human rights and labor issues, casting a shadow over the intended diplomatic objectives (Blake & Spies, 2020). In such contexts, football diplomacy risks becoming a form of image management rather than fostering meaningful

dialogue, as diplomatic messages may be perceived as superficial or propagandistic rather than authentic. These political limitations illustrate that while football can project favorable images, its effectiveness in diplomacy is often constrained by the host country's political environment.

Economic constraints also limit the potential of football as a diplomatic tool, as hosting major tournaments like the World Cup requires substantial financial investment, often accessible only to wealthier nations. For countries facing economic hardship, hosting a high-profile event can lead to financial strain, especially if the event fails to generate the expected economic returns. South Africa's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, for instance, aimed to boost tourism and economic development but ultimately faced criticism for the significant public expenditure involved, with limited long-term economic benefits. The high cost of hosting may deter economically disadvantaged nations from participating in football diplomacy, restricting the sport's diplomatic reach to countries with greater financial capacity (Beacom & Brittain, 2016). This economic limitation suggests that football diplomacy is often inaccessible to nations with fewer resources, potentially creating an imbalance in diplomatic opportunities and perpetuating inequalities in the global sports landscape.

Reflecting on these challenges, it becomes evident that football diplomacy requires a nuanced approach to achieve sustainable diplomatic impact. To harness the potential of football as a consistent diplomatic tool, policymakers and sports organizations should consider policies that address the cultural, political, and economic constraints associated with football diplomacy. Governments can begin by recognizing that sports diplomacy should be tailored to regional contexts, integrating sports that resonate with local audiences. For instance, cricket may be a more effective diplomatic tool in South Asia, while basketball may better serve diplomacy in North America and East Asia. Such adaptations would allow sports diplomacy to be more culturally relevant and increase its chances of fostering cross-cultural dialogue (Mazumdar, 2021).

Another policy recommendation involves promoting transparency and ethical practices in football diplomacy to build credibility and ensure that diplomatic objectives are achieved authentically. Host countries should adhere to ethical standards, particularly concerning human

rights, labor practices, and environmental sustainability, to avoid criticism that could undermine the diplomatic message. By emphasizing transparency and accountability, governments and sports organizations can foster genuine goodwill and prevent football diplomacy from becoming a tool for superficial image management. Additionally, international sports governing bodies, such as FIFA and UEFA, should enforce stricter standards for host countries, ensuring that football events contribute to meaningful social and diplomatic goals. Such policies would enhance the integrity of football diplomacy and strengthen its role in fostering international cooperation (Blake & Spies, 2020).

Encouraging collaboration between sports organizations and public diplomacy agencies is also essential for maximizing football's diplomatic potential. National governments and sports federations could partner to develop initiatives that leverage football for broader diplomatic engagement, such as exchange programs, youth development initiatives, and cultural events held alongside major tournaments. For example, organizing cultural exhibitions or educational programs in conjunction with international football tournaments can create opportunities for deeper cross-cultural understanding and engagement, reinforcing football's role as a diplomatic bridge. By integrating sports with cultural diplomacy initiatives, governments can use football as a foundation for sustained diplomatic efforts that extend beyond the event itself (Beacom & Brittain, 2016).

Future research on football diplomacy can deepen understanding of the nuanced relationship between sports and foreign policy by examining both successful and challenging cases of football's impact on international relations. While significant research exists on the role of football in fostering goodwill and soft power, more studies are needed to investigate the conditions under which football diplomacy fails to achieve its intended objectives. Examining cases where football has exacerbated tensions or produced limited diplomatic outcomes could provide valuable insights into the limitations of sports diplomacy, highlighting areas where policy interventions are necessary to enhance its effectiveness. Additionally, research on the ethical implications of football diplomacy, particularly regarding human rights and labor practices, could offer a

more comprehensive perspective on how to address the controversies associated with hosting major sports events.

Another potential area for research involves the role of digital diplomacy in sports, particularly how social media influences football's diplomatic impact. While scholars have begun to explore digital diplomacy's role in shaping public perceptions of host nations, more research is needed to understand the specific dynamics of social media during football events. Studies could examine how social media platforms facilitate direct engagement between nations, fans, and players, providing a nuanced analysis of how digital spaces influence diplomatic outcomes. Additionally, researchers could investigate how governments and sports organizations navigate social media's challenges, such as misinformation, to maintain positive narratives and control diplomatic messaging (Mazumdar, 2021). Such studies could inform future digital diplomacy strategies, enabling governments to harness the potential of social media more effectively in football diplomacy.

Finally, future research could explore the long-term impacts of football diplomacy on national identity, international relations, and regional cooperation. While football events often produce immediate diplomatic effects, understanding how these events shape relationships over time remains an underexplored area. Longitudinal studies that track diplomatic relationships before, during, and after major football events could provide valuable insights into whether football's diplomatic influence produces lasting changes in international relations or whether its effects are temporary. Research in this area could guide policymakers in designing football diplomacy strategies that foster sustainable diplomatic outcomes, allowing football to contribute more consistently to global cooperation.

In conclusion, while football diplomacy holds significant potential to bridge divides, promote cross-cultural understanding, and enhance soft power, it also faces distinct challenges and limitations related to cultural, political, and economic constraints. Addressing these limitations through targeted policies and future research can help maximize football's diplomatic impact, transforming it into a more effective and sustainable tool for international engagement. By tailoring sports

diplomacy to cultural contexts, promoting transparency, and leveraging digital diplomacy, governments and sports organizations can harness football's universal appeal to create positive and lasting diplomatic relationships. Future research on football diplomacy's complexities will further deepen our understanding of sports as a diplomatic instrument, ultimately contributing to a more interconnected and peaceful global community.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has explored the multifaceted role of football as a tool for diplomacy, tracing its influence through historical and modern examples, examining its successes and limitations, and highlighting the potential of sports to shape foreign policy and international relations. Football, as one of the world's most popular sports, holds a unique position in the diplomatic landscape, where it not only serves as entertainment but also as a medium through which countries communicate, engage with global audiences, and seek to reshape their international image. The narrative surrounding football diplomacy is rich with instances where the sport has fostered goodwill, normalized relations between adversarial countries, and projected soft power. Through major tournaments like the FIFA World Cup, nations have showcased their cultural values, infrastructure, and hospitality, using the sport as a stage for self-presentation and international engagement. However, as this article has highlighted, while football has the potential to build bridges and foster unity, its use in diplomacy is complex and not without its challenges.

The historical context of football and diplomacy offers valuable insights into the sport's capacity to influence political dynamics. Instances like the 1998 World Cup match between the United States and Iran show how football can facilitate interaction between nations with strained relations, offering moments of mutual respect and signaling openness to dialogue. Similarly, events such as the "Football War" between El Salvador and Honduras reveal the complexities of using sports as a diplomatic tool, as football's emotional and nationalistic associations can sometimes escalate conflicts rather than ease them. These cases underscore the dual nature of football diplomacy, where the sport's influence on foreign relations depends significantly on the broader political and social context. Despite the potential for

sports to bring people together, football's impact on diplomacy is not universal; it varies according to the historical, political, and cultural factors surrounding each event. This complexity illustrates that while football can act as a force for peace and reconciliation, it is not immune to the political realities that shape international relations.

In the modern context, football has continued to demonstrate its diplomatic power, with recent tournaments offering both examples of successful soft power initiatives and instances where limitations became apparent. The 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar exemplify how host countries use football to project a favorable image, connect with international audiences, and mitigate critical narratives. Russia sought to counteract its controversial image by showcasing a welcoming and modern nation, while Qatar used the World Cup to address cultural misconceptions and promote intercultural understanding. These examples reveal that football diplomacy has evolved into a sophisticated strategy, where countries actively manage how they are perceived through sports. Yet, they also highlight the challenges that arise when countries with restrictive political environments use football diplomacy to reshape their image. Issues such as human rights concerns and labor practices have shown that the image projected through sports events can be fragile, as global audiences and media scrutiny may counteract the intended diplomatic messages. These modern examples underscore that while football diplomacy remains a powerful tool, it requires authenticity, transparency, and ethical considerations to maintain its effectiveness.

Media influence, particularly with the rise of social media, has further expanded football's diplomatic reach by enabling real-time interaction and engagement on a global scale. Traditional media has long played a role in shaping public perception of host countries during major events, framing narratives that contribute to a country's image. Social media, however, has amplified this effect, allowing host nations, fans, and players to participate directly in the conversation. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have democratized the flow of information, allowing fans to share experiences, players to promote messages of unity, and governments to engage directly with global audiences. This new form of digital diplomacy has enhanced football's ability to foster cross-

cultural connections, create positive narratives, and promote unity. However, the same platforms that amplify football's diplomatic potential also present challenges, as negative narratives and controversies can spread just as quickly, affecting public perception and influencing diplomatic outcomes. Social media's role in football diplomacy thus represents both an opportunity and a challenge, highlighting the importance of strategic communication and narrative management in an increasingly connected world.

Despite its diplomatic potential, football's limitations as a tool for diplomacy must be acknowledged. Football's effectiveness in diplomacy is often constrained by cultural, political, and economic factors. In regions where football does not hold significant cultural value, its impact on public diplomacy may be limited, as audiences may not fully engage with its diplomatic messages. Political constraints, such as government restrictions and authoritarian control, can also limit football's ability to foster genuine dialogue and engagement. Economic barriers restrict many countries from hosting major events, further limiting the reach of football diplomacy to wealthier nations capable of handling the high costs associated with such tournaments. These limitations suggest that while football has a unique role in sports diplomacy, it cannot be relied upon as a universal solution to diplomatic challenges. Understanding the boundaries of football diplomacy and addressing these constraints are essential for maximizing the sport's impact in the diplomatic arena.

Reflecting on football's role in diplomacy reveals the broader significance of sports as platforms for international engagement and cultural exchange. In a globalized world, where nations are increasingly interconnected, sports offer a shared language through which people from different backgrounds can connect, understand each other's cultures, and build empathy. Football, with its massive following and cultural appeal, provides a powerful means of engaging with international audiences, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers to create spaces for dialogue. This quality is especially valuable in diplomacy, where sports can serve as neutral grounds for engagement between adversarial nations, promoting peace and understanding in ways that traditional diplomatic channels may not achieve. Football, and sports in general, exemplify how cultural activities can complement foreign policy efforts,

strengthening a country's soft power and enhancing its global influence.

Future directions in football diplomacy will likely focus on addressing the challenges and limitations that have emerged alongside its successes. Policy adjustments that consider ethical standards, transparency, and cultural relevance are essential for enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of football diplomacy. Additionally, as digital media continues to shape public perception, strategies that integrate digital engagement and narrative management will become increasingly important in ensuring that football diplomacy achieves its intended impact. By acknowledging both the potential and the limitations of football diplomacy, countries and international organizations can develop more sustainable approaches to using sports as diplomatic tools, fostering a more interconnected and cooperative global community.

In summary, football's role as a diplomatic tool is significant and complex, offering a dynamic means of engaging with the global public and shaping international relations. Football's ability to project national identity, foster cross-cultural connections, and promote unity underscores its value as a platform for diplomacy. However, the sport's impact on diplomacy is not absolute, as it is influenced by a range of factors that can enhance or hinder its effectiveness. Understanding these dynamics allows for a more informed approach to sports diplomacy, where football, along with other sports, can be strategically leveraged to build goodwill, address global challenges, and create lasting diplomatic impacts. In a world where cultural diplomacy is increasingly important, football serves as a reminder of the power of shared passions and common experiences to bridge divides and foster a more peaceful global society.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.



## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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