Nation-Branding through Sport: The Soft Power Strategy of Nations Sponsoring Football Clubs

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Soft power is a way of achieving goals through attraction rather than coercion (Felsch, 2016), where one actor convinces, in a non-coercive manner, another to want the same things they want (Nygård & Gates, 2013). Coined by Joseph Nye in 1990, ‘soft power’ is about reputational management for nations as opposed to the ‘hard power’ of financial incentives or military force (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). Dinnie (2015) and Krzyzaniak (2018) point out that soft power is a mechanism of strengthening a country’s political and cultural influence, improving reputation, boosting tourism, increasing trade and attracting investment, and attracting a skilled and talented workforce. According to Nygård and Gates (2013), nation-building can be achieved through four mechanisms of sport diplomacy and politics: (i) image building, (ii) building a platform for dialogue, (iii) trust building, and (iv) reconciliation, integration and anti-racism. This is often seen in sport by hosting mega events, sponsoring high-profile sport properties, and taking on naturalized athletes in their national team. For example, Qatar has employed ‘soft power’ techniques for nation-building, using sport as a platform to overcome issues related to health and well-being, progress and modernization, and peace and security (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

While nations have hosted mega-events (e.g., Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup) to gain soft power, some argue that sponsoring a high-profile sport property brings less scrutiny and costs much less (Krzyzaniak, 2018). Chadwick and Widdop (2017) define soft power sponsorships as an outward contractual relationship between a country/state-owned entity and a sport property aimed at promoting the attractiveness of a country, its culture and its policies, with the intention of altering the attitudes and behaviors of target audiences pertaining to the entity and/or country with which it is associated. Examples of these partnerships include Azerbaijan (Atletico Madrid), Malaysia (Cardiff City F.C.), Chad (FC Metz), Puerto Rico (Sevilla FC), Rwanda (Arsenal F.C.), and Qatar (Paris Saint-Germain F.C.).

Social media is a primary marketing channel used today by European professional football clubs to reach their target markets (Maderer, Parganas, & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to explore the use of social media by sponsoring nations and clubs for the purpose of nation-branding, employing soft power techniques. We will investigate the following two questions: a) how do nations sponsoring football clubs use social media for the purpose of building soft power? and b) What are the objectives, if any, of nations sponsoring football clubs communicated on social media as a soft-power building tool?

Focusing on nations sponsoring European football clubs in the 2019-2020 season (Qatar, Malaysia, and Rwanda), this study employs observational netnography (Abeza et al., 2017) to assess content (text, audio files, videos, pictures) communicated (during regular season - August 1, 2019 to May 31, 2020) via official Facebook account of the sponsoring nations and the sponsored teams. The presentation will address theoretical and practical implications, focusing on the state of soft power sponsorships versus traditional, nation-building, sport-based initiatives (e.g., hosting mega events).