

# From Qatar to Saudi Arabia: Beyond the Positive Legacy of a Mega Sporting Event and an Arab Branding Nation (*A Qualitative and Netnographic Study*)

Rym Khanfir<sup>1\*</sup>, Salma Mahouachi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rigueur Laboratory, University of Tunis, Tunisia

<sup>2</sup>Mediterranean School of Business, Tunis, Tunisia

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\*Corresponding author: Rym Khanfir

Rigueur Laboratory, University of Tunis, Tunisia

## Abstract

Major sporting events are key vectors for building the image of a nation. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar demonstrated that a country in the Arab Gulf region can successfully host a world-class event, generate measurable soft power gains and spread positive reputational capital across the region. This paper, based on a netnographic methodology, identifies five positive dimensions of transferable legacy: organizational excellence, cultural hospitality, quality of infrastructure, exceptional overall appreciation, and quantified soft power. It then examines how Saudi Arabia, host of the 2034 World Cup as part of its Vision 2030, can leverage each of these dimensions to accelerate its own national branding trajectory.

**Keywords:** National branding, Mega Event Legacy, Qatar 2022, Saudi Arabia 2034, Gentle Power, Netnography, Arab Hospitality, Vision 2030.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mega-sporting events offer host countries a unique opportunity for global visibility. Indeed, when this exposure is combined with ambitious preparation, impeccable organization, and strong cultural authenticity, it can produce lasting reputational gains that decades of traditional diplomacy have not been able to achieve (Anholt, 2007; Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2013). The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was the most recent and significant demonstration of this phenomenon in the Arab region. Despite the pre-event media coverage marked by skepticism, the event was met with near-unanimous praise from the experts, players and fans in attendance. FIFA President Gianni Infantino has publicly stated that it was "the best World Cup in history".

This observation raises a direct strategic question: what can Saudi Arabia, the confirmed host of the 2034 World Cup, actually get out of terms of a positive domestic brand? This is the central question of this article, addressed through a selective analysis focused on the positive and transferable aspects of the Qatar 2022 legacy.

The article is organized as follows: after providing a theoretical basis on national branding and soft power, the netnographic methodology is presented. Next, the main dimensions identified in the Qatar 2022 data are discussed. Finally, each dimension will be applied to the Saudi 2034 context. The final section discusses the theoretical and strategic implications as well as future locations.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 National Branding and Mega Sporting Events

National branding refers to the deliberate management of a country's international image in order to strengthen its reputation among specific target audiences (Anholt, 2007; Miño & Austin, 2022). The hexagon of competitive identity proposed by Anholt (2007) encompasses six levers: exports, governance, culture and heritage, investment, tourism and population. Major sporting events simultaneously activate several of these levers with an intensity that few other tools can match (Kobierecki & Strojek, 2017; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Heslop *et al.*, (2013, p. 13) make it clear: Many developing countries have placed a lot of faith on the idea

that hosting a mega-event can be a fast track to global recognition and reputation-building, and there is ample evidence that this gamble has positive impacts on countries' image and reputation and this claim is fully supported by Qatar 2022 data.

## 2.2 Soft Power: A Measurable Resource

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a state to influence the preferences and behaviors of other actors through attraction rather than coercion. The Brand Finance ranking; the Global Soft Power Index; putting this concept into practice through composite scores covering familiarity, reputation, influence, cultural heritage, tourist appeal and sports leadership (Brand Finance, 2024). Indeed, Qatar has made historic progress after 2022: it entered the global top 25 of the index for the first time, with specific improvements in brand awareness, influence, heritage and sports leadership (Brand Finance, 2023; Jagodzinski, 2023). This quantified result empirically validates the thesis that major sporting events serve as a measurable accelerator of soft power.

## 2.3 Legacy as a Strategic Concept

Preuss (2015) defines the legacy of a mega-event as the set of planned and unplanned, positive and negative, structures created by and for the event and that persist after its closure. In this study, we will focus only on positive and transferable structures, i.e. those likely to nurture the national brand trajectory of a future host sharing the same cultural, geographical and religious anchorage as Qatar. This analytical choice is consistent with the orientation applied to the article: it is a question of producing a map of inheritances that can be used positively. The bias is assumed, and its same assumption constitutes an explicit epistemological position (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Positive Bias Netnography

This study is based on a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002, 2015), adapted to the logic of oriented thematic selection. Netnography is defined as "a qualitative approach that adapts ethnographic methods to study emerging cultures through computer-mediated interactions" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). It captures organic, unsolicited discourses produced by free agents in their usual digital environments. The data was collected on Facebook (groups dedicated to the 2022 World Cup: FIFA World Cup – Qatar Group 2022, 78,900 subscribers; GoQatar 2022, 144,100 subscribers; FIFA World Cup - Qatar, 385,700 subscribers) and YouTube (FIFA channels, TRT World, Al Jazeera), during an immersion period from March 15 to April 30, 2023. Expert opinions come from the international press (Euronews, Forbes, Al Jazeera, DW, AGBI) and recent academic publications (2022–2025). Non-participant observation (Bernard, 2011; Spradley, 1980) was chosen in order to preserve the authenticity and spontaneity of the collected discourses. Thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2006) has made it possible to isolate five positive thematic units.

### 3.2 Corpus and Coding

The corpus includes 33 coded expert profiles (journalists, academics, former players, sports organization executives) and 32 public commentaries selected for their representativeness of the dominant positive discourses. The textual records illustrate recurring themes: organizational excellence, hospitality, safety, quality of infrastructure, and an outstanding overall appreciation. Only excerpts with a positive valence are cited, in accordance with the supposed epistemological bias of the study.

## 4. FIVE DIMENSIONS OF POSITIVE LEGACY: QATAR 2022

### 4.1 Organizational Excellence: A Global Standard Redefined

The organisational dimension is the first and strongest legacy of the 2022 World Cup. Qatar has demonstrated that a non-Western country, without a mass football tradition, can organise an event of the greatest logistical complexity with exemplary rigour.

*"The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 effectively applied and demonstrated best practices under the Event Sustainability Management System (ISO 20121) to successfully manage the event.* — Expert 31, Managing Director, SGS Qatar

*"Everything has been set up logistically, ready to welcome a lot of people who do a lot of different things.* — Expert 32, Beln Commentator, Jason McAteer

*"Qatar has organised the best World Cup. It couldn't be more perfect and I highly doubt that any other country could do the same.* — Comment 16, to support

The ISO 20121 Sustainable Event Management System certification is a strong sign of institutional competence, recognized by international organizations. Expert 14 (Al Jazeera) points out that despite the significant logistical challenges related to the status of first Arab host, "the government has seized the opportunity to invest massively in infrastructure, tourism and the sports industry, with a lasting impact on Qatar and the region". For Saudi Arabia, this precedent is decisive: it demonstrates that the region can reach the level of the world's highest sports institution, which was far from obvious before 2022. The ISO 20121 standard, the accreditation procedures, the systems for managing the flow of spectators, all of this constitutes a procedural capital that can be transferred directly.

### 4.2 Hospitality and Arab Culture: A Distinctive Competitive Advantage

The second positive dimension is the revelation, for millions of visitors from all over the world, of the

values of Arab hospitality in their most authentic expression. This legacy goes beyond the World Cup, it has produced a lasting reassessment of the image of the Arab-Muslim region in popular discursive spaces.

*"Having travelled around the world, I have never felt safer as a woman as I did in Qatar during the World Cup. I left my group and went home alone in the middle of the night. I wouldn't have done that in England or anywhere else! Such friendly and helpful people. — Comment 19, Visitor*

*"Qatar invoked traditional Arab hospitality." — Expert 10, Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Nottingham*

*"Affluent but generous, conservative but welcoming, a traditional Arab state with an eye for futuristic development. — Expert 9, Journalist, AGBI*

*"Friendly people ready to guide every step of the way. — Commentary 27, support*

*"Thank you for hosting the best and safe WC where families with women and children could be without hooliganism and dangers." — Commentary 25, to endure*

The absence of alcohol in stadiums, often presented by the Western press as a constraint, has been hailed in retrospect by much of the public as a more family-friendly, safer and more memorable atmosphere (Commentary 20, Commentary 26). This shift in perception is one of the most significant legacies of Qatar 2022: it has introduced a narrative space where Arab cultural difference becomes an asset, not an obstacle. Saudi Arabia inherits this narrative capital with an added advantage. Indeed, as the custodian of Islam's holy sites, Medina and Mecca, it possesses a cultural and spiritual legitimacy that Qatar cannot match. Arab hospitality, already appreciated in Doha, would find in Riyadh and Jeddah a reinforced historical and symbolic framework.

#### 4.3 Infrastructure: Correcting a Stereotype

The 2022 World Cup has forced the world to reconsider its representation of the technological and infrastructural capacity of Arab countries. Seven new stadiums, an integrated metro, an extension of Hamad International Airport, a port terminal for cruise ships: Qatar has delivered a complete infrastructure in less than a decade, in extreme weather conditions.

*"These are not just stadiums; they are works of art. — Expert 15, former Liverpool player*

*"Seven new state-of-the-art stadiums have been built. — Expert 14, Al Jazeera*

*"The Doha metro and tram service, allowing fans to easily move around the city during the tournament. — Expert 14, Al Jazeera*

*"Qatar was great given the proximity of the stadiums. All of this is pretty close, saving time, effort, and money. Free transportation — overall a very well organized World Cup. — Commentary 14, to support*

Al-Muhannadi *et al.*, (2024) point out that integrated environmental innovations, such as eco-carbon neutral technologies, recyclable modular stadiums, have put Qatar 2022 at the forefront of sustainably hosting mega-sporting events.

#### 4.3 Infrastructure: Correcting a Stereotype

For Saudi Arabia, this legacy translates into a now established feasibility argument: the region can be built. The 15 stadiums planned for 2034, including a futuristic site in the NEOM project, are the continuation of this event. The geographical proximity of Saudi host cities and investment in intercity transport networks are a direct inherit of the Doha model.

#### 4.4 Overall Assessment: A Historic Consensus

The fourth positive dimension is the remarkable convergence, between experts and the public, around a historically favourable assessment of the 2022 World Cup. This convergence, rarely achieved during post-event evaluations, is in itself a fact of national branding.

*"This edition of the World Cup in Qatar was 'the best ever'." — Expert 22, Gianni Infantino, FIFA President*

*"A World Cup like no other ends with a unique final, a memorable football story and the first tournament in a region that is often referred to negatively." — Expert 19, Al Jazeera.*

*"The compact FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 tournament has created an incredible atmosphere and benefits for players and fans alike. — Expert 20, Ronald de Boer, former Dutch international.*

*"Hats off!! Brilliant Qatar — We can't congratulate it enough for hosting the best World Cup ever. Now, a big fan of your beautiful country. — Commentary 5, Supporter.*

*"The best World Cup ever. I will never forget this time. — Comment 11, to endure*

Hajjaj *et al.*, (2024), in their analysis published in Heliyon, document how the World Cup has transformed Qatar into a global destination, with sustained growth in post-2022 tourism flows and a diversification of the non-hydrocarbon economy that the event has accelerated. Qatar Tourism (2024) confirms the continuation of this growth, validating the potential for sustainable transformation linked to this mega-event. Saudi Arabia has an additional advantage in this dimension: international tourism has already tripled

between 2016 and 2024, from 10 to 30 million visitors, with revenues reaching \$41 billion (El Zein, 2025). The 2034 World Cup would serve as an accelerator for a trajectory that is already underway.

#### 4.5 Soft Power: Quantified and Regionally Transferable Gains

The fifth and final positive dimension is the most strategically significant: Qatar has recorded measurable and quantified gains in soft power in the wake of the 2022 World Cup, and these gains are partially transferable to Saudi Arabia as the second Arab host country in the Gulf region.

*"Hosting the World Cup has allowed Qatar to project a set of aspirations that resonate within the community of nations."* — Expert 33, Simon Chadwick, Professor of Geopolitics and Sport, SKEMA Business School.

*"It is clear that Doha has achieved a victory in terms of soft power, if not in the world at large, then at least in the world of sport."* — Expert 9, journalist, AGBI.

Brand Finance (2023) documents Qatar's historic entry into the top 25 of the Global Soft Power Index, with specific improvements on: familiarity (+), reputation (+), influence (+), culture and heritage (+), sports leadership (+), lifestyle appeal (+). Brand Finance (2023) confirms: "Qatar saw a significant and immediate improvement in its Global Soft Power Index in connection with the World Cup, entering the top 25 globally for the first time." Saudi Arabia, which already has improvements indexed to its \$51 billion sports

investments (Brand Finance, 2024), can anticipate a similar effect after 2034. The PMC (2025) proposes a framework for the sustainability of sports soft power in three dimensions — cultural, environmental, social — each adapted to the Saudi context. Vision 2030 provides precisely this integrative framework.

## 5. FROM LEGACY TO STRATEGY: WHAT SAUDI ARABIA CAN LEARN FROM

### 5.1 Vision 2030: A Strategic Framework Introduced by the Qatari Precedent

Vision 2030, launched in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is a national transformation program estimated at \$3,000 billion (El Zein, 2025). Its three pillars — a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation — directly intersect with the dimensions of positive national branding identified in Qatar 2022 data. Football Week (2025) calls the 2034 World Cup "the Kingdom's most significant international declaration to date", and highlights that this event is positioned as the culmination of Vision 2030: a global showcase that synthesizes eighteen years of economic, social and cultural transformation. This convergence between national agenda and mega-sporting event is not new: China achieved it with Beijing 2008, Qatar led it with the \$220 billion national construction project. Saudi Arabia, however, has a more diverse strategic base and a larger population (35 million people, 63% of whom are under the age of 30) to amplify this effect.

### 5.2 The Five Inheritances Transferred: Correspondence Table

**Table 1: Correspondence between the five dimensions of the positive legacy of Qatar 2022 and their potential capitalization by Saudi Arabia 2034**

Dimension	Qatar 2022 Legacy	Saudi Arabian Market Cap 2034
Organizational Excellence	ISO 20121 certification, spectator flow, FIFA accreditation	Reuse of protocols, transfer of skills, regional reference
Cultural Hospitality	Re-evaluation of Arab hospitality by millions of visitors	Amplified by the legitimacy of the guardian of Islam's holy places
Infrastructure	7 stadiums + metro + airport in less than a decade	15 stadiums, NEOM, intercity network, confirmation of regional capacity
Overall assessment	Consensus of experts and the public: "best World Cup in history"	The tourism trajectory is already underway (30 million visitors, \$41 billion in revenue in 2024)
Quantified Soft Power	Entry into the top 25 of the Global Brand Finance Soft Power Index	Similar expected gains; \$51 billion in preparatory investments in sports

### 5.3 Saudi Arabia's Assets

Beyond Qatari heritage, Saudi Arabia has national branding resources that Qatar cannot match:

**The Universal Spiritual Dimension:** Guardian of Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia is the religious center of gravity of 1.8 billion Muslims in the world (Çevik 2025; Alfelali and Garcia-Fuentes 2020). A World Cup welcoming tens of millions of fans from 48 nations could be part of a spiritual and cultural environment unprecedented in the history of football.

**The Infrastructure of Sport is Already Global:** Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has hosted the Formula 1 Jeddah Grand Prix, the Spanish Super Cup, the Italian Super Cup, world-class boxing fights, the Dakar Rally (Almahraj, 2023; Halwani *et al.*, 2023; Taylor *et al.*, 2023; Grix & Brannagan, 2024). The Saudi Pro League has attracted Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, Karim Benzema: all mechanisms of global exposure that have prepared audiences around the world to positively associate Saudi Arabia with elite sport (Bataneh *et al.*, 2025; Alawi, 2024).

**Youth as a Vector of Enthusiasm:** With 63% of the population under the age of 30 (Vision 2030, 2024), Saudi Arabia has a naturally enthusiastic domestic fan base, making the 2034 World Cup their generational event, carrying a collective energy comparable to that of France in 1998 or Brazil in 2014 (Svoboda *et al.*, 2024).

**The Unprecedented Scale of the 48-Team Format:** The 2034 World Cup will be the first of a 48-team format to be held in a single host country, which could generate more media visibility and audience volume. Indeed, the World Cup is described as one of only two true global sports mega-events, with unparalleled audience "capture" and commercial value (Grix *et al.*, 2023). Broadcasting and sponsor revenues could also reach record levels, mechanically amplifying the potential for soft power (Rahman-Blake, 2025; Misener *et al.*, 2024).

#### 5.4 Strategic Narrativization: "Growing Together"

The official slogan of the Saudi bid, "Growing Together", is a deliberately universalist and inclusive national brand slogan, built around three pillars: "Growing People Together" (Social Transformation through Football), "Growing Football Together" (Game Development), and "Developing Connections Together" (Saudi 2034, 2024) (Satish *et al.*, 2024; Li and Feng, 2021; El-Dabt *et al.*, 2025). This three-pronged approach, echoing Anholt's Six Dimensions of the Hexagon (2007), is the continuation of the Qatari narrative of an Arab Gulf open to the world, capable of receiving a fascinating and enriching intercultural dialogue. It capitalizes on the positive narrativization of Qatar 2022, taking it to a higher level.

## 6. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS AN ARAB MODEL OF NATIONAL BRAND THROUGH SPORT

### 6.1 A Cumulative Regional Legacy

The comparative analysis reveals the existence of a regional process of accumulation of reputational capital: each mega-sporting event in the Arab Gulf capitalizes on the gains of the previous one and adds an additional layer to the visibility and legitimacy of the region. Qatar 2006 (Asian Games), 2011 (Asian Cup), 2015 (World Handball Championships), 2019 (World Athletics Championships) and 2022 (FIFA World Cup) form an organisational and reputable learning trajectory that Saudi Arabia inherits directly. This cumulative process corresponds to what the PMC (2025) calls "sustainable strategic national branding through sport": a long-term strategy in which sports reputation accumulates over a planned sequence of events, with each step reinforcing the next. Saudi Arabia does not enter terra incognita: it creates a regional narrative that it is well placed to bring to its climax (Çevik, 2025; Alfelali and Garcia-Fuentes, 2020).

### 6.2 Lived Experience as a Counter-Narrative to Pre-Information

One of the most important takeaways from Qatar 2022 for Saudi Arabia's national branding strategy

is the power of lived experience as a perception modifier. Visitors who were physically present in Doha during the World Cup generally obtained ratings invalidating negative press predictions before the event. Direct contact, with infrastructures, stadiums, the metro, visitors, the kitchen, security, acted as a powerful corrector of pre-existing representations. This dynamic confirms Anholt's (2007) thesis that direct experiences are the most effective vector for changing the national image. For Saudi Arabia, this means that the main challenge for 2034 is not so much the media communication before the event as the quality of the experience offered to the millions of visitors physically present. Every visitor who leaves with a positive experience becomes an organic ambassador, a national brand media at an almost free cost (Satish *et al.*, 2024).

### 6.3 The Multiplier Effect of the 48-Team Format

The 2034 World Cup will be the first of an expanded format of 48 teams in a single country. This means more participating nations, more fans, more fragmented but broader media coverage, and a longer international presence on Saudi territory (Grix *et al.*, 2023), which could amplify the positive image effects identified at Qatar 2022 (Rahman-Blake, 2025; Misener *et al.*, 2024).

For the Saudi Pro League, already in accelerated growth (the competitive index surpassing Japan and South Korea in 2024-25 according to Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 2025), the 2034 World Cup represents an additional legitimization platform since the Saudi football ecosystem will definitively enter the global collective consciousness, supported by the investments of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) in Newcastle United, in LIV Golf, and in the League itself (Bataineh *et al.*, 2025; Taylor *et al.*, 2023; Grix *et al.*, 2023).

### 6.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three contributions to the literature on national branding and mega-sporting events. First, it proposes a framework for the transfer of positive heritage between successive hosts in the same cultural region, conceptualized around five operational dimensions. Second, it empirically documents the power of lived experience as a modifier of representations, based on spontaneous ethnographic data. Third, it proposes the notion of the "Arab model of national sports branding" as a distinct analytical category, characterized by the articulation of Islamic hospitality, massive investments in infrastructure, and quantified soft power.

### Managerial Contributions: Levers for Strategic Management

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research identifies operational pathways for actors involved in the management of the national brand and major sporting events.

The Transition from "Projector" To "Sunlight" (Image Sustainability):

National branding managers must move from an event-show logic (an "ephemeral projector") to a permanent ecosystem logic. Integrate the 2034 World Cup not as an end in itself, but as an accelerator of the tourism and sports infrastructures already programmed in Vision 2030. The objective is to transform the occasional visitor into a regular tourist thanks to the quality of the experience, confirming Anholt's (2007) thesis on the memorization of services.

#### **Hotel Management as a Strategic Asset:**

The study shows that Arab hospitality, when structured and mediatized, becomes a distinctive competitive advantage. Managers should professionalize hospitality on a large scale by training "frontline ambassadors" (airport staff, hoteliers, volunteers). For Saudi Arabia, it is a question of relying on the historical know-how of welcoming pilgrims (Alfelali and Garcia-Fuentes, 2020) to adapt it to the codes of the international football fan, thus creating a unique value proposition in the global tourism market.

#### **Operation of the "Multi-Home Accommodation" (48-Team Format):**

The expanded format of 48 teams requires management of geographical dispersion. Indeed, marketers should design content strategies specific to each host city in order to avoid the shadow cast by the capital (Riyadh). The challenge is to transform this logistical constraint into an opportunity to discover the cultural and geographical diversity of the country, thus maximizing the overall media exposure identified by Grix *et al.*, (2023).

#### **Synergy between Sport-Commerce and National Branding:**

The appeal of the Saudi Pro League and investments must not operate in silos. By aligning the stories of the clubs (Al-Hilal, Al-Nassr, etc.) with those of the World Cup. By using global numbers as communication vectors (Bataineh *et al.*, 2025), managers can pre-sell the Saudi experience well before the competition begins, reducing negative cognitive biases among international audiences.

#### **Monitoring of "Real-Time Reputation":**

The experience of Qatar has shown that perception changes during the tournament thanks to social media. By setting up 'social listening' and rapid response units to leverage moments of organic enthusiasm from fans in attendance, a shift from top-down communication to co-creation of branding with fans will be created, essential to turning sympathy capital into sustainable soft power (Rahman-Blake, 2025).

## **7. LIMITS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PATHS**

### **7.1 Study Limitations**

Despite the theoretical contribution of the "Arab model of nation branding", this analysis has some limitations. First, the study relies heavily on a strategic perspective for Saudi Arabia 2034, based on the successes of Qatar 2022. However, the effectiveness of soft power is inherently unstable and depends on the global geopolitical context, which could evolve unpredictably in the next ten years. Finally, the unprecedented scale of the country (in contrast to Doha's geographical concentration) poses logistical challenges that could fragment the fan experience and mitigate the hospitable bubble effect seen in Qatar.

### **7.2 Future Pathways of Research**

Several avenues of research deserve to be explored to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon:

**The Impact of the 48-Team Format on Brand Value:** With 104 games and an extended duration of 39 days, it will be crucial to investigate whether this dilution of media attention reinforces or, conversely, saturates the host's brand image.

**Social Sustainability and National Engagement:** Beyond international visibility, research should focus on how Vision 2030 truly transforms local sports culture and the sense of national belonging among Saudi youth.

**Digital Nation Branding and AI:** By 2034, the role of fragmented social platforms and virtual sports tourism experiences could redefine the way a nation projects its image. How will algorithms and consumption by "clips" influence strategic narrativization?

**Towards a Typology of "Autocratic Branding Models":** A broader comparative analysis between the Gulf states and other emerging powers would validate whether this model is specific to the region or whether it heralds a new global standard of sports diplomacy.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar produced a multidimensional positive legacy: certified organizational excellence, a global revelation of Arab hospitality, a historic infrastructural demonstration, outstanding global appreciation, and measurable gains in soft power in international indexes. These five dimensions constitute a strategic asset that Saudi Arabia, host of the 2034 World Cup, is better positioned than any other nation to inherit and amplify.

The country has a nation branding ecosystem of unprecedented power in the region, supported by Vision 2030 (2024), massive investments of \$51 billion in sports and already robust tourism growth with 30 million visitors in 2024. This dynamic is based on resources that Qatar could not mobilize on the same scale: The universal spiritual dimension: As the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia acts as the religious center of gravity for 1.8 billion Muslims (Çevik, 2025; Alfelali and Garcia-Fuentes, 2020). An already globalized sports

infrastructure: The hosting of Formula 1, the Dakar Rally and the attractiveness of the Saudi Pro League (Ronaldo, Neymar, Benzema) have already prepared global audiences to associate the Kingdom with high-level sport (Almahraj, 2023; Bataineh *et al.*, 2025; Alawi, 2024). An internal demographic driver: With 63% of its population under the age of 30, the country benefits from a domestic fervor capable of transforming the event into a generational milestone comparable to France 98 or Brazil 2014 (Svoboda *et al.*, 2024). The new 48-team format: By being the first single host country of this expanded format, Saudi Arabia maximizes its media exposure, audience volume and potential for commercial value capture (Grix *et al.*, 2023; Rahman-Blake, 2025).

The narrative strategy "Growing Together" (Saudi 2034, 2024; Satish *et al.*, 2024) is a continuation of the narrative of an open and fascinating Arabian Gulf, while taking it to a higher level. The 2034 World Cup is thus the political and marketing instrument that can transform this ecosystem into a sustainable national image, recognized and valued on a global scale (Li and Feng, 2021; Misener *et al.*, 2024). In short, the Arab model of sports nation branding, inaugurated by Qatar in 2022, is entering its maturity phase with Saudi Arabia.

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