

# Nation-branding Opportunities Through Sport Mega-events: Tourism Impact from FIFA World Cup in South Africa 2010 and Qatar 2022

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**Abstract:** Sport mega-events can be powerful agents in the imaging, re-imaging and branding of places, especially for emerging mega-event host nations. South Africa was the first African country to host the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and is a good case of how nation-branding opportunities were leveraged to showcase its global engagement, re-emergence post-apartheid, and its competence as a tourism and mega-event host. Similarly, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup is a region-first for the Middle East. Hosting the World Cup is aligned to Qatar's strategic leveraging of sport to build a new image, acquire global recognition as a world-class venue for major events, sport sponsorships, and state-of-the-art stadiums. Yet Qatar, like South Africa, was confronted with significant detractors and negative media coverage in the lead-up to its hosting. This paper compares nation-brand perceptions collected from international visitors to the respective mega-events. The studies aimed to identify any changes to these brand perceptions because of their visit to these nations. It utilises the same instrument and method; with the survey instrument for 2010 adapted for Qatar to increase its relevance. A total of 561 (South Africa) and 421 (Qatar) international visitors were interviewed at event and tourist locations, using a spatially based, purposive sampling approach. The findings reveal how visitor perceptions changed in both instances. It reveals nuances in profiling mega-event sport tourists and contrasts expected nation-branding legacies for host nations, especially in emerging nation contexts.

**Keywords:** Nation-Branding; FIFA World Cup; Qatar; South Africa

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## 1. Introduction

Large-scale and sport mega-events (SMEs), such as Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups, have been more frequently hosted in emerging nations (Knott & Tinaz, 2021), largely been driven by the assumption that their legacy provides solutions to economic, social, cultural, or political challenges. SMEs can be powerful agents in the imaging, re-imaging, and branding of countries, which can be leveraged for both diplomacy and trade and tourism benefits. There has been a growing awareness of the potentially significant brand-related impacts that hosting sport mega-events can have for a country. Anholt (2007) first referred to 'nation branding' and confirmed sport mega-events as providing an opportunity to create or promote a host nation's image and re-brand a nation. Sport mega-events have become even an object of public policy or 'soft power' strategy in many emerging nations, perhaps viewed as 'a fast-track to world recognition and reputation enhancement' (Heslop et al, 2013, pp. 13).

South Africa was the first among the African countries to host the FIFA World Cup in 2010. Although South Africa had its share of publicised problems, such as rising crime rates, high unemployment, a lack of access to basic services such as housing and education, and a high HIV infection rate (Donaldson & Ferreira, 2009; Bob, Cornelissen, & Swart, 2010), the hosting of the World Cup symbolised hope for the country and a chance to prove that this developing nation could host an event of this magnitude as efficiently as the developed economies who had hosted the previous editions of the event, such as Germany in 2006 and Korea and Japan in 2002. Heightened media attention on the nation in the lead up to the mega-event had focused on many negative aspects such as inflation, crime, xenophobic riots (Tomlinson, Bass, & Pillay, 2009), casting doubt over the country's ability to host the event successfully and safely.

Yet, several papers have indicated that the development of a positive and distinct South African nation brand was accelerated through the effective hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup (e.g., Allen, Knott & Swart, 2013; Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2017). The South African case provides one of the best examples of how nation branding opportunities were strategically created and leveraged to showcase its global engagement and re-emergence

from the isolation of the apartheid era as well as its competence and capability as a tourism and mega-event host (Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2017).

Qatar, much like other Gulf states, has made significant investments in sport as a means of economic diversification, and to accomplish its geopolitical goals through 'soft power' recognition (Nye, 2021) and nation branding opportunities that come with hosting major sport events (Al Thani, 2021; Amara, 2005; Dorsey, 2014; Reiche, 2015). By leveraging sport mega-events, host countries like Qatar aim to attract worldwide attention and present a positive image of themselves. This is consistent with the nation's strategic leveraging of sport to build a new image for the country. Bidding for and hosting various sport mega-events, including the FIFA World Cup, has helped Qatar to acquire recognition globally as a world class sporting venue with major events, sport sponsorships and state of the art stadiums (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Reiche, 2015). Creating a brand identity using sport diplomacy is one of Qatar's aims to position itself globally (ISSEC Sports Chair, 2014; Al-Tamimi, Amin & Zarrinabadi, 2023). Some have perceived this also as an attempt to change Qatar's image as a terror-sponsoring state (Samuel-Azran et al, 2016).

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the first mega-event in the Arab world, was aligned to achieving Qatar's National Vision 2030 objectives of addressing economic, social, environmental, and human development and improving its regional positioning (Scharfenort, 2012). The hosting of this mega-event was viewed as an opportunity to diversify Qatar's long-term revenue sources and achieve its vision of becoming a regional and international sports hub (Foley, McGillivray & McPherson, 2012; Reiche, 2015; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). The event was also seen as an opportunity to address negative stereotypes associated with Muslim countries and showcase Arab hospitality (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Swart & Hussain, 2023; Ishac & Swart, 2022).

Like South Africa 2010, Qatar 2022 faced immense challenges, especially in relation to negative media coverage by the western media from the very beginning. In 2010, Qatar won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup amidst significant controversy over corruption scandals. In the years that followed, the country faced continuous scrutiny for its human rights records, particularly regarding migrant workers (Ganji, 2016). Although sport mega-events have been utilised for soft power gains, they can carry significant reputational risks for host countries, which can result in soft disempowerment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). This is particularly acute for countries like Qatar that receive pervasive negative media coverage, especially in Western media outlets (Elbasri & Torman, 2022). Like many developing nations that face potentially incorrect or stereotypical associations, Qatar's government was accused of allowing the abuse of migrant workers (Almaskati, 2014). In response, FIFA pressured the government to comply with international labor laws to ensure that the stadiums and facilities for the 2022 World Cup would not be built on the backs of abused and exploited workers.

Given that both these editions of the World Cup were hosted in emerging countries, this paper therefore critically reviews the findings from the same study methodology utilised by the authors in these two contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

The application of branding techniques to nations is growing in frequency while Dinnie (2003) notes that there are increasingly more reasons why nations must manage and control their branding, such as the need to attract tourists, factories, companies, and talented people, and to find markets for their exports. In the struggle for competitive advantage, national reputation is becoming more and more significant as countries compete for the attention, respect and trust of investors, tourists, consumers, donors, immigrants, media, and governments (Anholt, 2007).

A nation's brand image can be defined as the sum of all beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a nation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kotler et al, 2003; Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007; Govers & Go, 2009). Brand image is therefore a 'subjective interpretation of reality' made by the tourist (Govers & Go, 2009, pp. 18). Kotler and Gertner (2002) explain that most country images are in fact stereotypes, extreme simplifications of the reality that are not necessarily accurate. They might be dated, based on exceptions rather than on patterns, on impressions rather than on facts, but are nonetheless pervasive.

Sport can be a powerful agent in the imaging, re-imaging and branding of countries, especially through the hosting of sport mega-events (Getz, 2003; Higham & Hinch, 2009). Several studies have concluded that there were strong influences on perceptions of the nation under study because of its hosting a sport mega-event (e.g., Gibson, Qi & Zhang, 2008; Kim & Morrison, 2003). Rein and Shields (2006) explain how sports stimulate an emotional heat between the participants and the audiences that can symbolise the energy, vigour, and strength of an emerging nation in ways that other branding efforts simply cannot do. Sport events offer the potential to

build strong associations between specific people (participants and spectators) and particular places (Higham & Hinch, 2009). Higham and Hinch (2009, pp. 242) note the growing prominence of sport in terms of place identity and the potential for sports to offer 'authentic cultural experiences of place'. Mendes, Oom Do Valle, and Guerreiro (2011, pp. 371) also refer to the experiential nature of events, explaining that an event provides a chance for visitors to 'carry out a gratifying experience with access to the local cultural scene'.

The high media profile of mega-events can be harnessed to increase the awareness, prominence and standing of places as well as serve as an agent of change in terms of imagery and place meaning (Florek & Insch, 2011; Chalip & Costa, 2005; Higham & Hinch, 2009). Events constitute an important stimulus factor in the image formation process of a destination (Mendes et al, 2011). Florek and Insch (2011) assert that the potential to build and enhance the image of a destination through a mega-event is unlimited. For example, the Olympic Games have long been used to serve the imaging or re-imaging of places (Higham & Hinch, 2009).

However, a sport mega-event is no guarantee of a positive brand outcome for the host nation. Some state's image may suffer. This was the case with recent events hosted by non-Western countries with a problematic image in Western media, namely China and Russia. Samuel-Azran et al, (2016, pp. 3) proposes that these countries damaged their international image further by 'inadvertently directing the world's attention to their (mis)deeds' during the preparation and hosting of the events. For example, China's hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games suffered from a media focus on human rights violations and pollution, while Russia's hosting of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games and the 2018 FIFA World Cup encountered fierce media opposition to its stance on gay rights.

Therefore, despite several academic studies indicating positive branding outcomes for host nations of mega-events, including the case of South Africa in 2010 (e.g. Swart & Martin-Gonzalez, 2021), the case of Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup presented an opportunity for further exploration of this topic, especially due its non-Western setting and the largely negative Western media sentiment surrounding the preparations for the event.

### 3. Methodology

This paper draws on comparisons of two primary investigations designed to assess the nation-branding perceptions impact from hosting FIFA World Cups in two emerging nations, namely South Africa and Qatar. The studies both aimed to identify perceptions of international visitors to the mega-events, regarding the respective nations, and determining any changes to these brand perceptions because of their visit during the event. The studies compared in this paper are similar in their design in terms of a focus on international visitors to the event at a point in time (during the mega-event).

The two studies utilised the same questionnaire, which was adapted from 2010 with minor variations to increase its relevance for visitors to Qatar in 2022. The original questionnaire design was based on Anholt's (2007) nation brand hexagon, Kersting's (2007) conceptualisation of national identity, and Gibson et al.'s (2008) Beijing Olympic Games perception analysis. The conceptual model on which the study is premised is based on Knott, Fyall and Jones (2017), which sets out the characteristics of sport mega-events that create opportunities for nation-branding.

The questionnaire design was structured, using closed-ended questions and Likert-type scales, although open-ended questions were also used to test prior and current perceptions of the brand. Face-to-face, intercept questionnaire interviews were used to gather perceptions of the international sport tourists in South Africa and Qatar. Respondents were interviewed at the official fan parks, stadium precincts and tourist locations in host cities during the event periods.

A total of 561 (South Africa) and 421 (Qatar) international visitors, using a spatially based, purposive sampling approach, were interviewed. The computer software Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS for windows) was used to capture and analyse the data.

### 4. Results

The number of tourists surveyed at both events was similar ( $n = 561$  and  $421$  respectively for South Africa and Qatar). The gender profile for both populations was identical (77% male), while the age profile was slightly older for the Qatar study, with a mean age of 37 years, compared to 32 years in South Africa. However, the country-of-origin profile of these respondents differed dramatically.

For South Africa, most visitors came from the country’s traditional tourist source markets in Western Europe (United Kingdom 27%; Netherlands 11%; and Germany 10%) and North America (USA 15%). Fewer visitors came from the host’s non-traditional tourist markets such as Central and South America (8%), Asia/ Australasia (8%) and other African nations (7%). For Qatar, nearly 36% of respondents came from North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt). Neighbouring Saudi Arabia accounted for 5,9%, with other nearby countries such as Iran and India (3,3% each). South Americans (Argentina and Brazil) accounted for 9,5%, followed by the USA (3,6%), and UK (3,3%).

For both studies, most respondents (75% for South Africa and 77% for Qatar) were first-time visitors. While the World Cup was the primary reason for travel in both cases, it was more so for the Qatar sample (51% and 74% respectively). Far fewer of the Qatar sample (14%) had attended a previous World Cup than for South Africa (37%).

First-time visitors were asked for their unprompted, open-ended perceptions of the host country before they visited. In both cases, the prior perceptions were more stereotyped (see Table 1). For South Africa, this revealed traditional tourist strengths such as: the natural beauty; abundance of wildlife; and diversity of cultures and people. However, the top prior perception of the nation was negative (“crime/ safety and security”). For Qatar, there was also a mix of positive or neutral perceptions (e.g., wealthy; desert; hot climate; conservative, Islamic) and negative perceptions (e.g., expensive; human rights issues).

**Table 1: Brand perceptions (unprompted)**

South Africa 2010 (n=561)	Qatar 2022 (n=421)
Perceptions of host changed due to the event 67%	44%
<b>Top unprompted perceptions prior to visiting host nation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural beauty;</li> <li>Crime/ security concerns;</li> <li>Segregated society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wealthy;</li> <li>Expensive;</li> <li>Desert;</li> <li>Hot climate;</li> <li>Conservative;</li> <li>Islamic;</li> <li>Human rights issues</li> </ul>
<b>New associations related to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe to travel;</li> <li>Friendly, welcoming people;</li> <li>Competent, capable event host;</li> <li>Modern, developed cities;</li> <li>Travel/ tourism infrastructure;</li> <li>Diversity of culture and people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beautiful;</li> <li>Hospitable;</li> <li>Welcoming;</li> <li>Amazing;</li> <li>Modern infrastructure;</li> <li>Developed</li> </ul>

New, prompted, perceptions of the brand among all visitors (see Table 2) were gauged using a Likert-type scale to indicate respondents’ level of agreement with a set of different question endings. For South Africa, the highest levels of agreement were for: “beautiful scenery and natural attractions” (98%); “many friendly, welcoming people” (95%); and “a world-class tourism destination” (94%). For Qatar, the top three were: “a safe place to visit” (94%); and “a competent host of the football World Cup” (91%) and “many friendly, welcoming people” (90%).

**Table 2: Nation brand perceptions (prompted: Agree/ Strongly Agree)**

“Do you believe that South Africa has/is... ?” (in %, n=561)		“Do you believe that Qatar has/is... ?” (in %, n=421)	
beautiful scenery and natural attractions	98	beautiful scenery and natural attractions	68
many friendly, welcoming people	95	many friendly, welcoming people	90
a good climate for tourism and sport	92	a good climate for tourism and sport	67
many diverse cultures	92	many diverse cultures	85
a competent host of the football World Cup	92	a competent host of the football World Cup	91
a world-class tourism destination	94	a world-class tourism destination	85

“Do you believe that South Africa has/is... ?” (in %, n=561)		“Do you believe that Qatar has/is... ?” (in %, n=421)	
an excellent destination to host future sport mega-events	85	an excellent destination to host future sport mega-events	89
world-class sport facilities	85	world-class sport facilities	86
several successful sports teams and participants	69	several successful sports teams and participants	69
a desirable country to live in	62	a desirable country to live in	84
a safe place to visit	66	a safe place to visit	94
a segregated (divided) social society	53	a segregated (divided) social society	72
many business or investment opportunities	44	many business or investment opportunities	80
a stable democratic government	26	an Islamic country ruled by an absolute monarchy	72
well-respected political leaders	38	well-respected political leaders	84
		a technologically innovative country	89
		a respectful and tolerant society	87

The researchers added two additional dimensions for the Qatar study, as these were found to be important to the nation brand. These factors also received high levels of agreement, namely: a technologically innovative country (89%); and “a respectful and tolerant society” (87%). A further item relating to political governance was tweaked to reflect the inherently different 2022 host nation. While there was very little agreement for South Africa being perceived as “a stable democratic government” (26%), Qatar was perceived as “an Islamic country ruled by an absolute monarchy” (72%).

There were many perceived similarities between both nations, mostly relating to their competence as event hosts, sporting facilities and achievements, and level of tourism development. Larger differences appeared for the following items, with South Africa more closely perceived as having: “beautiful scenery and natural attractions”; “a good climate for tourism and sport”. Contrastingly, compared to the South Africa perceptions, Qatar was more strongly perceived as: “a safe place to visit”; “a desirable country to live in”; having “well-respected political leaders”; and offering “many business or investment opportunities”, although also featuring a “segregated (divided) social society”.

## 5. Discussion

From the profile of the respondents, it appears that the sport tourists continue to have a different profile from regular visitors to a destination. In both instances, the sport tourists tended to be relatively young (although slightly older in the case of Qatar) and predominantly male. Gender has been a neglected area of sport tourism (Achu, 2018). Historically, football has been regarded as a male-dominated sport (Bama & Tichaawa, 2015). This study indicates that for the FIFA World Cup, the gender profile of sport tourists has remained consistently more male-oriented, supporting other mega-event and football event studies (e.g., Achu, 2018; Getz, 2003; Turco, Riley & Swart, 2002).

It appears that the FIFA World Cup is effective in attracting first-time visitors to a host nation, who will travel primarily for the event, as opposed to repeat visitors. In South Africa’s case, a third of visitors had attended a previous World Cup, but for Qatar this number was halved (14%). It is not clear if Qatar’s results could be considered a trend of diminishing serial mega-event tourists, however. It is likely related to the previous FIFA World Cups being held in Russia and Brazil, whereas Qatar 2022 was more accessible to those from North-African and Middle East countries.

Regarding the role of sport mega-events in nation-brand development, the perceptions of sport tourists were extremely positive in both cases, further supporting the notion that mega-events can be effectively used as nation-branding opportunities (supporting the likes of: Essex & Chalkley, 1998; Rein & Shields, 2006; Gibson et al, 2008; Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2017).

Regarding the perceptions of the South African brand, it was interesting to note that respondents held very few clear perceptions of the brand prior to travelling. While most of these perceptions related to positive aspects such as “natural beauty” and “wildlife” (the more common associations with African nations), there were also negative perceptions, most notably those that related to “crime / safety and security fears”, as well as with the nation’s oppressive “Apartheid” past.

Similarly for Qatar, there was a mixture of positive (e.g., wealthy), neutral (e.g., desert; hot climate; conservative, Islamic) and negative perceptions (e.g., expensive; human rights issues) that emerged as unprompted perceptions. Of interest here is the larger contribution of neutral associations to the Qatar perceptions. However, both studies indicate a superficial level of perceptions for respondents prior to visiting the country. This is perhaps to be expected, given that both are considered emerging nations.

The prompted nation-brand perceptions scoring most highly were those that have been traditional brand strengths for both nations, and those that are more experiential in nature for short-term visitors (i.e., factors related to people, culture, climate, attractions and facilities). The top perceptions of Qatar were: “a safe place to visit”; “a competent host of the football World Cup” “a world-class tourism destination”; and “many friendly, welcoming people”.

The factors that scored less highly in the case of South Africa, were those related to aspects of politics/ leadership; residence/ relocation; and business/ investment opportunities. The responses for these perceptions of Qatar were notably higher, especially for Qatar as “a desirable country to live in” and having “many business or investment opportunities”. The strong associations with Qatar as being “an excellent destination to host future sport mega-events” and “a respectful and tolerant society”, supports one of the top perceptions of Qatar as having “many friendly, welcoming people”, as noted previously. These latter perceptions may be of even greater importance to the nation brand, given the international media portrayal of human rights issues in the nation.

It is important to note a limitation of this study before discussing the conclusions. The most important limitation to the surveys is that it can be difficult for respondents to determine their prior perceptions once they are travelling in the country. However, given the challenge of identifying visitors prior to their arrival, this methodology being used consistently across events can still illustrate perception changes or trends. Additionally, it would have been useful to compare the nation-brand impact of the event on non-travelling fans (spectators).

## 6. Conclusion

Sport mega-events have received much criticism over the past decade, especially considering the much-publicised FIFA scandals (Knott and Swart 2018), with Qatar’s bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup a central story within the accusations (Swart and Mammadov 2022). This paper demonstrates that despite this, a sport mega-event presents a significant opportunity to change or influence nation brand perceptions, most significantly among event visitors (sport tourists).

With both events studied in this paper being emerging nations, the findings provide further evidence for the ability of sport mega-events to provide an extraordinary opportunity for nation brand-building among emerging nations, or lesser-known nation brands. This paper proposes that a mega-event specifically creates an opportunity to counter certain negative aspects of a nation brand that may be experienced differently by visitors compared to what is portrayed in global media. This was certainly the case in South Africa, where tourists experienced a safe and developed tourism destination. For Qatar, visitors associated the nation with welcoming people and a tolerant society – perceptions not related to the media portrayal of an intolerant society.

The findings suggest that sport mega-events may promote certain aspects of the nation brand more than others. For example, the attributes such as “people”, “culture and heritage” and “tourism” appear to be most influenced, with lesser impact on perceptions of “government”, “investment” and “exports”. This may be a result of the experiential nature of sport tourism and perhaps represents a lack of knowledge of other aspects of a nation’s society or activities.

The case of South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup is one of the successful long-term legacy cases relating to nation branding through a sport mega-event (Swart et al. 2019). Tichaawa and Bob (2015) investigated a broader legacy for the African continent from the 2010 mega-event, and there should be similar broader, and longitudinal studies conducted for Qatar and the neighbouring Middle East region.

Furthermore, South Africa has not continued to host mega-events near the scale of the 2010 mega-event in over a decade since then. Qatar is different in that it hosts a large portfolio of annual large-scale events. It is also committed to promoting the nation through high profile sport events, teams, and leagues in other nations. This supports the groundswell of opinion within the literature that advocates a portfolio of events (with mega-events supported by smaller-scale or homegrown events) rather than a strategy purely focused on a once-off, mega event (Knott and Swart 2018). The consistent policy of using sport as a driver for nation branding by Qatar deserves further interrogation and a longitudinal approach to the assessment of legacy.

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