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### EDITED BY

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### REVIEWED BY

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India  
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Union Nikola Tesla University, Serbia

### \*CORRESPONDENCE

Puja Mahesh  
✉ pmahesh@siu-dubai.ac.ae;  
✉ rani.puja@gmail.com

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# From fields to feeds: emotional soft power and nation branding through GCC sports streaming

Puja Mahesh<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Tausif Mulla<sup>1,2</sup>, Nadeen Selim<sup>3</sup>, Dalia Hassan<sup>3</sup>  
and Farah Zahidi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Media & Communication Department, Symbiosis International University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, <sup>2</sup>Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India, <sup>3</sup>College of Mass Communication, Umm Al Quwain University, Umm Al Quwain, United Arab Emirates, <sup>4</sup>City University Ajman, Ajman, United Arab Emirates

**Introduction:** International sporting mega-events are an important medium of soft power projection, which enable Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to showcase their culture and modernization, as well as engage with international audiences through persuasion rather than coercion. However, the effectiveness of this strategy becomes complicated by the emergent and rapid digitalization of content consumption, raising questions about how engagement through global streaming platforms (e.g., YouTube, DAZN) can turn into observable soft power outcomes in the GCC context. To address this gap, this study conceptualizes and tests a comprehensive dual-pathway framework. This framework connects audience interactivity with sports content hosted in the GCC to subsequent attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, specifically by exploring the satisfaction paradox previously documented in mediated cultural experiences, and by distinguishing audience media engagement from host-country engagement as a downstream soft power outcome.

**Method:** A quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design ( $N = 317$ ) was adopted among non-GCC audiences who have been viewing sporting events from streaming services (e.g., ESPN+, DAZN). The study explored the effects of viewing frequency, platform, perceived interactivity, and cultural proximity on engagement and the soft power in its early stages of development (familiarity, appreciation, engagement, and behavioral intention).

**Results:** The results showed that engagement is strongly influenced by how often people watch and whether they are focused on specialized sports content (e.g., ESPN+, DAZN), driving more engagement than other entertainment platforms.

**Discussion:** The findings indicate that international sports streaming consumption can act as an emerging site of soft power diffusion for GCC nations. The interplay between viewing frequency, interactivity, and cultural proximity highlights how mediated sports experiences through digital platforms foster audience engagement, forming the foundation for familiarity, appreciation, and positive behavioral intentions toward the host region.

### KEYWORDS

over-the-top (OTT), soft power, sporting events, sports diplomacy, streaming platforms

## 1 Introduction

In contemporary international politics, culture has also become an important tool of global influence, as it allows countries to influence perception and relations through appeal and not force. Nye's (1991, 2019) construct of 'soft power,' built on culture, values, and policy conveys the power of persuasion and voluntary compatibility to achieve objectives which force often cannot. In the case of the media, soft-power is expressed in the form of cultural narratives delivered through globally accessible streaming platforms, where the audience grows emotionally and is mentally connected to the identity of a nation.

Global sporting events have emerged as particularly successful instruments for exercising soft power, offering host countries an exceptional opportunity to present their culture, identity, and modernization. They are also an effective means to deliver soft power (El-Dabt et al., 2025). Countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been cognizant of this opportunity, with Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia as the pre-eminent nations offering their nation as the host destination of international sports competition (Bianco and Sons, 2023). These events serve strategic purposes beyond athletics, aligning with broader goals of nation-building and economic diversification away from oil-dependency. While nation branding and soft power are sometimes used synonymously, they reflect different but related ideas (Anholt, 2006; Nye, 2019). Soft power refers to a state's capacity to generate attraction through events, culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2019), functioning as a relational and process-oriented form of influence. Nation branding, in contrast, refers to the strategic management and communication of a nation's image in order to shape external perceptions (Anholt, 2006; Li et al., 2024; El-Dabt et al., 2025). In this study, digital sports environments are conceptualized as soft power infrastructure, whereas familiarity, appreciation, host-country engagement, and behavioral intention constitute nation branding outcomes reflecting the attitudinal and behavioral manifestations of soft power among international audiences. The purpose of this study was to examine how attraction is developed within the context of digitally mediated sports environments with respect to the development of attraction for a sport-related nation brand. Unlike studies that have focused upon the explanation of behavioral intentions toward a nation brand (i.e., national identity) as an endpoint (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011; Wang et al., 2023), this study examines the psychological processes by which attraction is generated. In particular, attraction was examined within a two-process model of audience media engagement and audience attitude, with host-country engagement treated as a downstream soft power outcome rather than an interchangeable construct, which, when combined, produce early-stage attraction manifesting as enhanced familiarity, enhanced appreciation, and enhanced engagement. While these forms of attraction may eventually evolve as a result of the nation-brand's effects on the audience's behavior (i.e., behavioral intention), they were examined in this study as evidence of attraction rather than as the focus of the study.

Soft power in digitally mediated sports contexts can contribute to nation-branding outcomes among international audiences. However, hosting an event alone does not automatically generate soft power; its impact depends on how audiences perceive, interpret, and engage with the event. Digital platforms are reshaping how we connect. Services like YouTube, DAZN, and beIN Sports move beyond traditional broadcasting by offering interactive tools such as live chats,

commentary, and user-generated content. This shift transforms cultural exchange from a one-way stream into a two-way conversation.

Audiences naturally gravitate toward content that mirrors their language and heritage. This sense of cultural proximity fosters a deeper connection to the media they consume (Lu et al., 2019). For large expatriate communities, these shared symbols are essential; as they help viewers build a sense of identity and form positive attachments to the content (Mustaqeem, 2025). Despite growing awareness of these dynamics, significant research gaps persist. Research has shown that sports can promote national branding and legitimacy (Knott et al., 2017; El-Dabt et al., 2025), but little is known about how 'soft power' is produced in the GCC region through sports or digital sports culture. Furthermore, we have seen some contradictory patterns, where positive media attitudes lead to familiarity and engagement with culture (Arias, 2019) while at the same time reducing immediate behavioral intentions. This study bridges these gaps by testing a framework that links audience engagement with GCC mega-sports events to soft power outcomes. It examines Gulf sports streaming not just as entertainment, but as a specific communication behavior within international relations. Utilizing a dual-pathway approach, this study offers a contextually grounded understanding of digital diplomacy within the GCC, suggesting that sports streaming can serve as a conduit for soft power diffusion under conditions of state-led sport branding - a proposition that warrants replication across other geopolitical contexts before broader claims are advanced.

In line with this contextual positioning, the scope of the present study is deliberately delimited. This study is situated within the specific geopolitical and media ecology of the GCC, where digitally mediated mega sports events function as strategic instruments of nation branding and international visibility. While the proposed model advances theoretical understanding of soft power processes in digitally mediated contexts, its empirical grounding remains contextually bounded. The GCC represents a distinctive political economy of sport, characterized by state-led branding initiatives, transnational expatriate audiences, and intensive digital amplification strategies. The findings should therefore be interpreted as analytically informative rather than universally generalizable, contributing context-sensitive theoretical refinement rather than claims of global representativeness.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Soft power, nation branding, and sports diplomacy

According to Grix et al. (2025) and Nye (2019), soft power derives from three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate or morally authoritative by the public. The central theoretical challenge lies not in defining soft power, but in understanding the psychological mechanisms through which attraction is generated within digitally mediated environments. Existing research mainly focuses on the assumption that when people are exposed to international media or international sports events it directly fosters soft power orientation. However, the mechanism(s) through which audiences create their own soft power orientations remain under-theorized. This study examines this gap in theory as it relates to the development of the psychological link between digital mediation of sports and subsequent audience engagement, attitudinal evaluations,

and soft power manifestation. Culture, symbols, values, and storytelling are part of effective nation branding that goes beyond tourism, travel, foreign direct investment, and diplomacy (Dineri et al., 2024). But this relationship poses theoretical questions about authenticity and intentionality.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have entertained sports diplomacy establishing avenues for soft power and utilizing sports as a means for diversifying their economies. GCC states have successfully entertained high profile sporting mega-events as a means to harness international visibility and manage complex relations diplomatically and to communicate cultural narratives of modernity couched with inclusion (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; AlKhalifa and Farello, 2021; Al Dosari and Aisha, 2024). Others, however, contend that such investments are manifestations of 'sports washing,' strategic initiatives designed to obscure contentious domestic policies through positive sporting associations. While sports washing is frequently invoked as a critical counter-narrative to state-led sports investments, the present study treats it as a contextual discourse rather than an empirical construct. Conceptually, sports washing operates at the level of media framing, political critique, and normative evaluation, whereas the analytical focus of this study lies on audience-level perceptual and engagement mechanisms that underpin soft power formation. Accordingly, sports washing is mobilized here to frame the broader debate surrounding GCC sports diplomacy, not to function as a directly measured predictor within the empirical model. The tension between genuine cultural appeal and strategic image management raises questions regarding the audience's ability to distinguish between authenticity and public relations, and whether this distinction impacts soft power outcomes.

Building on these conceptual debates, the following section examines how audience engagement serves as a psychological and emotional mechanism through which such power is materialized during mega-events, while acknowledging competing explanations for observed relationships.

## 2.2 Audience engagement and emotional resonance

The significance of audience stakeholders in mega sporting events is directly related to soft power. Audiences experiencing feelings towards the event (such as pride, satisfaction or admiration of the host nation) are likely to also possess feelings associated with the host nation (Rookwood, 2019; Byon et al., 2025). This emotional relationship is created through symbols of national identity such as flags and national anthems and ceremonial aspects of the event, which provide legitimacy to the host nation and reinforce the identity of the nation.

Nonetheless, the causal directionality of this association merits consideration. Do sporting events elicit favorable attitudes, or are favorable attitudes the reason for selective exposure to events featuring certain nations? The preponderance of the literature employs cross-sectional designs, which preclude causal inference and leave basic questions concerning directionality unanswered. Secondly, the period of exposure and effects of audience involvement with the content of the event affects that effect. The effect of audiences' exposure to mega sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup, which occurs over several occasions, is to increase the awareness of such audiences as well as to change the knowledge of different global audiences with regard to the host nation, its infrastructure, values and identity into a more favorable one (Florek et al., 2008; Næss and Svendsen, 2025). The

question remains however, whether the enhanced appreciation produces behavior change or is dissipated by the time of the ending of the event. Existing literature reveals a significant disconnect between observed attitudinal shifts and subsequent changes in actual behavior.

In terms of soft power development, positive attitudes towards aspects of media coverage of mega sporting events are important mediating variables. These variables in particular form the link between engagement and soft power outcomes, such as familiarity and a sense of appreciation for the event organizer, and behavior change (Postlethwaite and O'Byrne, 2025). These pieces of work collectively suggest that emotional attachment and symbolic representation are the psychological channels via which exposure leads to soft power effect. Notwithstanding the differences in context, they all ultimately converge upon the theme that it is affective investment in contrast to mere viewing, which is the crucial factor in engendering international perceptions of host nations. However, whilst the burgeoning consensus on this point is gratifying, it may be rather that the convergence relates to similarity of technique than to empirical robustness. The partial dependence upon self-reported attitudes and intentions, together with the absence of longitudinal studies following actual behavior effects raises questions as to whether the effects reported are indicative of real soft power transfer, or merely measurement abnormalities. Emotional engagement allows audiences to internalize national imagery through their feelings. While digital and streaming platforms have opened new channels for this connection, they have also added layers of interactivity and transnationalism to soft power. Whether this technological variety actually strengthens or fractures the flow of influence remains an open question.

## 2.3 Streaming platforms as soft power arenas

The emergence of digital streaming platforms has altered how sports diplomacy and audiences can participate. Platforms such as beIN Sports, YouTube, and Twitter can promote soft power initiatives by providing access to content globally and actively engaging users (Søyland and Moriconi, 2022). On the other hand, this optimistic assertion about the capabilities of technology assumes that the features of these platforms will result in intended diplomatic outcomes without empirical testing of effectiveness, and rather, it is an assertion made based on theory. Engagement in the act of consuming content, on streaming platforms, is influenced by factors like user experience, interactivity and personalization. Liu (2019) showed that engagement in a sports experience was moderated by factors like live chats, social media, user content, and their effects on viewer enjoyment and emotional engagement. The authors Abdul-Ghani et al. (2019) emphasized that this engagement is defined through motivation versus consumption, as the engagement of user experiences came from increased intrinsic motivation to engage versus passive consumption. However, with these findings, there are methodological concerns about selection effects. In other words, does interactivity cause or create engagement, or do highly motivated audiences self-select into platforms that offer interactive features? Due to the correlational nature of existing empirical research, previous studies have tended to support the alternative hypothesis. The research substantiates that perceived interactivity is a moderating variable that produces amplified relationships between audience exposure to events and audience engagement, with streaming access facilitating two-way interactivity which may cement participants as more a part of and mutually engaged in the event, whilst

deepening their emotional and cognitive engagement as viewers (Costa and Moriconi, 2024). Ultimately, findings indicate a transition from conventional broadcast forms of spectatorship to participatory diplomacy, whereby involvement in activity is no longer a passive experience yet a co-constructed phenomena through user interactivity, and the stadium medium as a digital interactivity. Whether such interactive participation is meaningful soft power engagement or simply low-level online engagement is theoretically uncertain. The literature shows a level of technological determinism, attributing soft power outcomes to platform affordances alone, without investigating boundary conditions or contexts that do not lead to such outcomes. More importantly, it is the assumption that interactivity based on digital interactivity leads to deeper cultural understanding that needs to be examined empirically and not taken as a given.

Digital streaming platforms change how soft power is created and experienced. Unlike traditional sports media, which offered the same content to everyone, streaming uses algorithms, on-demand access, and interactive features that shape how people find and engage with national stories. Audiences are no longer just passive viewers; rather they help make meaning, which increases the importance of engagement and relevance in shaping soft power (Jenkins, 2006; Cha and Chan-Olmsted, 2024; Mulla et al., 2025). Digital media does not just expand sports diplomacy; it changes how it works.

## 2.4 Cultural proximity and audience behavior

Cultural proximity can be defined as sharing a similar language, religion, values, or familiarity with a region of the world, and how this influences media engagement. Cultural or linguistic proximity would likely lead to a more positive and engaging audience perspective upon viewing the event (Bengesser et al., 2023). However, the conceptualization of cultural proximity presents significant measurement challenges that the literature has inadequately addressed. Does it reflect inherent similarity between cultures rooted in shared heritage and values, or does repeat media exposure construct a sense of familiarity that researchers then label as proximity? This distinction carries theoretical implications for whether cultural proximity represents a stable predisposition or a malleable perception shaped by strategic media deployment.

For the purpose of this study, we distinguish between structural dimensions of cultural proximity (linguistic similarity, religious congruence, heritage connections, geographic proximity) and affective dimensions (emotional identification, cultural appreciation, symbolic attachment). While both are theoretically important, we focus empirically on affective cultural proximity given it demonstrated predictive power for sustained media engagement and parasocial relationships in sports consumption contexts (Tsiotsou, 2015). In the context of the GCC, the regional audience may be more emotionally and culturally invested in events with fellow Gulf countries. Events such as the Women's Gulf Cooperation Council Games and men's and women's regional football events create stronger conditions for audience engagement, with more similarities in identity, pride, and culture, which facilitate stronger engagement and more positive nation branding conditions (Al-Khalifa and Al-Khalifa, 2022). However, cultural proximity is complicated by the GCC's significant expatriate communities, especially from South Asia and Africa. Are these audience connected by a true cultural proximity on the basis of shared values, or does engagement

reflect practical geographic proximity and availability of media rather than deep cultural engagement? Furthermore, the typically unidimensional treatment of cultural proximity conflates distinct theoretical constructs, failing to distinguish between shared linguistic meaning and situational context. Relationships may be operated through various psychological channels (e.g., linguistic familiarity with, religious equality with, descent relationships with, knowledge of exposure to, etc.), yet these are treated by writers as though they composed single phenomena only. Such weakness in our definitions does not assist the advance of theory or its application.

## 2.5 Pathways to soft power development

El-Dabt et al. (2025) proposed a hierarchical model of audience engagement which confirms that emotional engagement with mega sports events, supported by positive media coverage and interactive digital platforms, can produce soft power impacts for audiences. These impacts have a hierarchical order, from increased familiarity to enhanced appreciation to active engagement to behavioral change such as tourism, investment, or diplomatic alignment. Therefore, together, audience viewership, streaming platform, cultural proximity, and platform integration convey audience perspectives and pull together soft power outcomes in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context.

Although previous studies have explored the role of mega sporting events in nation branding and soft power construction, the variables of audience exposure, preferred streaming platforms, cultural proximity, and perceived interactivity have rarely been empirically studied in combination to determine how they together construct soft power outcomes, especially in the unique socio-cultural and digital contexts of the GCC countries. Therefore, the current study addresses this gap by proposing and testing a comprehensive conceptual framework to illustrate the progression from an audience's engagement with mega sports events hosted by GCC countries to soft power outputs. In addition, the study draws out audience engagement variables to illustrate some of the resulting attitudinal shifts and behavioral change outcomes compared with testing moderating variables such as cultural proximity and platform interactivity. Ultimately, the study aims to provide empirical contributions to understanding how soft power is produced by both digital and cultural channels in the GCC.

## 2.6 Research gaps

Although previous studies have examined mega sporting events as tools for nation branding and soft power, few have jointly analyzed how audience exposure, preferred streaming platforms, cultural proximity, and perceived interactivity shape soft power outcomes—particularly within the distinct socio-cultural and digital settings of the GCC region. Existing research faces three main gaps.

Causal mechanisms linking digital engagement to soft power outcomes are unclear, as most studies rely on cross-sectional, self-reported data that show correlations rather than causation. Furthermore, the literature's technological optimism assumes that platform affordances automatically lead to diplomatic gains, disregarding boundary conditions and cultural contexts. Finally, potential paradoxical effects are often overlooked - immersive media experiences may reduce real-world engagement by fulfilling cultural curiosity in digital spaces.

This study proposes a framework that examines how audience engagement with GCC-hosted mega sports events leads to soft power outcomes. It considers both positive and negative pathways, as well as the effects of cultural proximity and interactivity, providing a nuanced understanding of how digital and cultural mechanisms co-produce soft power in the region.

### 2.6.1 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

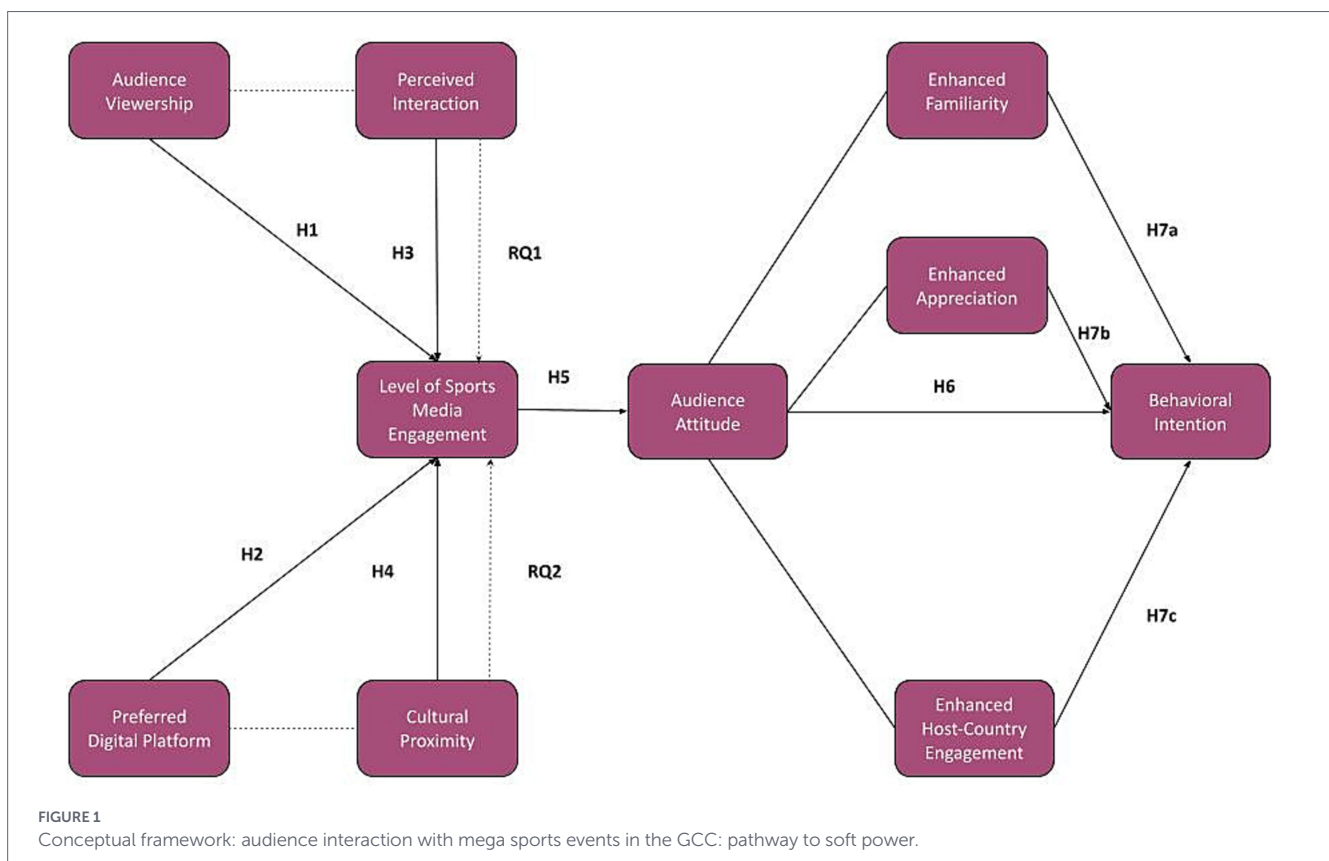
The conceptual framework in Figure 1 resolves existing theoretical gaps by introducing a dual-pathway model of digital sports diplomacy. Standard linear models often assume that exposure leads directly to action; this framework challenges that. Instead, it examines how direct effects and paradoxical shifts interact, specifically looking at cases where user satisfaction might actually weaken future intentions. By positioning digital mediation as the core driver, the model shows how exposure evolves into engagement. This shift reflects the unique, often unpredictable way soft power functions within social platforms.

Within the proposed framework soft power is conceptualized as being operationalized through digitally mediated sports environments; and its influence is theorized to be achieved at the audience level. Familiarity, appreciation, host-country engagement, and behavioral intention, therefore, function as measurable manifestations of soft power within the context of GCC sports streaming. Of these constructs, engagement warrants particular clarification, given that it operates at two distinct levels within the model.

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, it is important to distinguish between the different analytical roles of engagement within the proposed model. First, sports media engagement refers to audiences' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with digitally mediated

mega sports content. This construct functions as an antecedent within the model, predicting evaluative attitudes toward media coverage. Second, host-country engagement represents a higher-order relational orientation toward the GCC nation itself, reflecting openness to cultural learning, symbolic affiliation, and ongoing attention to national narratives. In this sense, it operates as an outcome-level dimension within the soft power hierarchy and as a mediating mechanism linking attitudes to behavioral intentions. Although both constructs employ the term 'engagement,' they refer to conceptually distinct levels of analysis: the former concerns media-based involvement, whereas the latter captures an emerging relational connection to the nation brand.

This conceptual framework examines the relationship between audience engagement with mega sports events and the development of soft power in the GCC. The framework begins with two key variables that influence audience engagement with mega sports events: the viewing frequency of mega sports events (H1) and the preferred online platforms for viewing mega sports events (H2). The next two key variables contribute to direct audience engagement with mega sports events: the perceived interactivity of the online platform (H3) and cultural proximity (H4). This indicates that a higher level of audience engagement with mega sports events can help individuals display higher levels of positive attitudes towards mega sports media coverage (H5), which consecutively changes the intentions to behave according to mega sports media coverage of the host nation of mega sports events (H6). This conceptual framework further states that this effect takes place through three mediated processes of mega sports media coverage: increased familiarity (H7a), enhanced appreciation (H7b), and increased engagement (H7c). This conceptual framework enables the reader to understand the efficiency of mega sports media coverage as a tool for developing soft power influence by exploring the impact of mega sports media coverage on the intended



target audience. The proposed framework was designed to make a clear distinction between basic psychological mechanisms and exploratory boundary conditions. Direct effects provided an account of the basic theoretical mechanisms through which sports engagement in digital media contributes to soft power effects. Moderation effects were also examined separately to test whether the relationships varied across conditions, without considering them crucial to the basic logic of the model.

Although past research suggests that cultural closeness and the interactivity of the platform could be the factors that influence the media effect, the evidence for the moderating role in digital soft power is not consistent. As there is no theoretical consensus on the moderating role, the moderating role is investigated in an exploratory manner. The intention is to be simple while at the same time testing for the moderating role.

### 2.6.2 Research questions and research hypotheses

*RQ1:* Does cultural proximity condition the relationship between preferred sports streaming platforms and audience engagement?

*RQ2:* Does perceived interactivity condition the relationship between audience viewership of GCC sports events and audience engagement?

*H1:* Higher audience viewership of Gulf sports events is associated with a higher level of engagement.

*H2:* Mean engagement differs across audiences' most preferred digital platforms.

*H3:* Perceived interaction with the digital sports platform has a positive influence on the level of audience engagement with mega sports events.

*H4:* Cultural proximity has a positive effect on the level of audience engagement with mega sports events.

*H5:* Audience engagement level has a positive influence on audience attitudes towards the media coverage of mega sports events.

*H6:* Audience attitudes towards media coverage of mega sport events have a positive influence on behavioral intentions towards the host country.

*H7a:* A positive relationship between audience attitude and behavioral intention is mediated by increased familiarity with the host country.

*H7b:* The relationship between audience attitude and behavioral intention is mediated by enhanced appreciation of the host country.

*H7c:* The relationship between audience attitude and behavioral intention is mediated by host-country engagement.

All the hypotheses of direct effect are based upon well-established theories of media engagement, cultural proximity, and soft power

development, and the exploratory analysis was carried out to test the conditional effects. The framework acknowledges the methodological limitations inherent in the cross-sectional self-reported designs while providing empirical evidence regarding relationships that the existing literature has asserted theoretically but has not adequately verified. By testing competing mechanisms simultaneously, rather than assuming linear progression, the model provides a more nuanced understanding of how digital sports consumption may or may not generate soft power outcomes in contemporary media environments.

## 3 Research methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between audience exposure and digital engagement, and their impact on soft power outcomes within the GCC context. Quantitative surveys offer a structured and systematic approach to testing relationships among theoretically defined variables, enabling researchers to generalize their findings across populations while translating abstract concepts, such as soft power, into measurable constructs (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The cross-sectional design captures audience attitudes and behaviors at a single point in time, offering a snapshot of current trends in GCC sports consumption and enabling comparisons across demographic or national groups - an important step in mapping soft power pathways.

A cross-sectional research design is appropriate for the present study as it seeks to examine contemporaneous perceptions, evaluative judgments, and engagement behaviors related to GCC-hosted sports content rather than changes over time. Such designs are widely employed in media and consumer behavior research when the objective is to test theoretically specified relationships at a given point rather than to model longitudinal dynamics (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Given the perceptual and attitudinal nature of soft power outcomes, a cross-sectional approach provides an efficient and methodologically sound means of capturing audience responses within a defined media context.

Furthermore, the sample size of  $N = 317$  was determined based on established guidelines for structural equation modeling. Hair et al. (2019) recommends a minimum of 200 participants for SEM when constructs have three or more indicators with standardized loadings exceeding 0.70, which our measurement model achieves (all loadings > 0.70). Following the '10 cases per parameter' rule by Kline (2016), our model required approximately 260 participants for stable parameter estimation.

### 3.1 Sampling strategy and participant selection

The population of interest comprises international audiences of GCC-hosted mega sports events. This focus aligns with the theoretical logic of soft power, which prioritizes external audience perceptions over a nation's domestic self-image. Unlike GCC residents whose attitudes may reflect domestic nationalism or economic interests, international audiences offer clearer tests of attraction-based diplomacy. GCC nationals were excluded to ensure that participants represented non-dominant audiences encountering GCC media from an external vantage point, thereby maintaining an analytical focus on the reception of soft power among expatriates.

Sampling was conducted using purposive selection through Prolific, an established online research platform recognized for diverse and reliable respondent pool. Participants were recruited using eligibility filters that ensured non-GCC residential status, active streaming use, and English fluency. Each respondent received GBP 0.40 for completing the survey, consistent with platform norms. Qualification criteria required that respondents be non-GCC nationals and residents residing outside GCC countries, have watched at least one GCC-hosted sporting event in the previous 12 months, and have consumed this content via digital streaming platforms. The twelve-month time-frame captured current consumption patterns while remaining sufficiently broad to include audiences of various significant events.

The final sample consisted of 317 valid responses (recruited via Prolific) representing 28 nationalities. South African participants comprised the largest subgroup (52.1%), followed by Indian participants (11.0%). This overrepresentation may limit generalizability, though it offers valuable insights into cultural identification. The demographic profile was skewed toward younger participants, with 69.7% of respondents under 40 years old, aligning with global digital sports consumption patterns, where younger audiences dominate streaming platforms. Gender representation showed moderate balance (57.7% female, 42.3% male). This sampling approach enhances ecological validity by mirroring the multicultural, digitally active audiences most likely to engage with GCC sports content, particularly South Asian and African diaspora communities, which are known to follow GCC-hosted sporting events. To account for potential demographic confounds, age, gender, nationality group, and viewing frequency were included as control variables. The non-significant coefficients ( $p > 0.05$ ) for these controls suggest that the observed soft power effects are driven by psychological constructs rather than demographic variance, thereby strengthening the study's internal validity. Consequently, the inferential scope of the study is limited to digitally engaged international audiences with existing interest in GCC sports content. The sample composition enhances ecological validity for key diasporic constituencies in Gulf sports diplomacy, but it precludes strong claims about international publics in regions underrepresented here.

### 3.2 Data collection and ethical procedures

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Symbiosis International University, Dubai Campus. All participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, data usage, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw without penalty at any time.

All 317 participants provided informed consent online via Prolific's standardized platform. Participants were recruited using eligibility filters that ensured non-GCC residential status, active streaming use, English fluency, and consumption of at least one GCC-hosted sporting event in the previous 12 months via digital streaming platforms. All data were collected anonymously and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

### 3.3 Measurement instruments and construct operationalization

The survey operationalized eight theoretical constructs through multi-item scales adapted from established research, with minor wording modifications to fit the GCC sports streaming context while

maintaining conceptual fidelity. Sports media engagement captured cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in digitally mediated mega sports content through four items measuring time spent viewing, sustained attention, emotional excitement, and active information seeking, reflecting [Brown's \(2015\)](#) conceptualization of multidimensional involvement transcending passive consumption. Perceived interactivity assessed subjective platform experience through three items measuring responsiveness to user input, ease of content sharing, and access to real-time information, aligned with [Lu et al.'s \(2019\)](#) emphasis on subjective rather than objective features. Cultural proximity was operationalized through three items measuring affective cultural connection to GCC nations: appreciation for regional traditions, enhanced enjoyment from cultural context, and emotional involvement with GCC teams. While acknowledging that cultural proximity represents a multidimensional construct encompassing linguistic similarity, religious congruence, heritage connections, and affective bonds ([La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005](#)), our measurement focuses specifically on the affective/emotional dimension. This choice reflects theoretical evidence that emotional connection to cultural symbols and teams strongly predicts ongoing engagement with mediated sports content ([Tsiotsou, 2015](#)), making it the most relevant dimension for our research objectives.

In contrast, audience attitude towards media coverage evaluated content quality perceptions through four items measuring reliability, expectation fulfillment, content variety satisfaction, and presentation enjoyment, remaining analytically distinct from engagement by capturing evaluative judgments rather than emotional involvement. Regarding soft power outcomes, enhanced familiarity operationalized awareness-level outcomes through four items measuring knowledge of current developments, recognition of cultural symbols, ability to describe regional distinctiveness, and perception of increased global recognition, while enhanced appreciation captured affective dimensions through four items assessing respect for political and cultural viewpoints, willingness to share positive information, valuation of regional contributions, and perception of commitment to international cooperation. Additionally, host-country engagement was measured as an outcome-level construct reflecting relational openness toward the GCC nation, through four items: openness to learning about GCC lifestyle and traditions, willingness to recommend the region as a destination, active following of GCC media content, and perception of the host country as a meaningful cultural exchange partner. Finally, behavioral intention was assessed through three items measuring tourism interest, perception of stability, and relocation consideration ([Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020](#); [Gorji et al., 2023](#)).

All constructs employed five-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), providing sufficient response variance for parametric analysis. Three items (PI1, CP1, BI2) were removed following confirmatory factor analysis due to low standardized loadings ( $< 0.50$ ), which improved construct reliability ( $CR > 0.70$ ) without compromising theoretical coverage ([Hair et al., 2019](#)).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Data screening and descriptive statistics

Data were screened for normality and missing values prior to hypothesis testing. Skewness and kurtosis were within the

recommended range (of  $\pm 2$  for skewness and kurtosis) (Kline, 2016). No identified extreme outliers existed. Harman’s single-factor test showed that none of the factors explained the bulk of the variance (28.4%), meaning little common-method bias existed. A post-hoc test on common latent factor generated similar results to affirm that self-reporting did not excessively inflate observed relationships between constructs.

Table 1 lists descriptive statistics on demographic variables. Participants were randomly sampled from the full range of national origins, with the largest group by far consisting of the South-African respondents. There was an age distribution bias towards younger ages, with 36.9% of the participants between the ages of 18 and 28 years and 32.8% between the ages of 29 and 39 years. Gender distribution was moderately feminine (57.7%). Media-use frequency ranged variability, with “sometimes” chosen by 39.7%, “several times a week” by 35.0% and “always” by 25.2%. Most preferred media platforms congregated on YouTube (37.9%), ESPN+ (29.7%) and DAZN (14.5%).

*H1: Higher audience viewership of Gulf sports events is associated with a higher level of engagement.*

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare engagement across levels of viewership frequency. The test was significant,  $F(2, 314) = 135.32, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.46$ , representing a large effect size (Cohen, 2013). The observed  $\eta^2 = 0.46$  indicates that nearly half the variance in audience engagement is explained by viewership frequency. Practically, this suggests that when audiences regularly consume Gulf sports content, engagement intensity substantially increases, underscoring the media’s strategic potential for disseminating soft power.

Polynomial contrasts confirmed a linear trend,  $F(1, 314) = 242.89, p < 0.001$ . Post hoc comparisons by Games-Howell (Table 2) suggested

that low viewers had significantly lower engagement than both medium and high viewers ( $p < 0.001$ ), and medium viewers had lower engagement than high viewers ( $p < 0.001$ ). Means and standard deviations by group are presented in Table 3. Thus, H1 was supported.

*H2: Mean engagement differs across audiences’ most preferred digital platforms.*

Engagement also significantly differed by preferred online platform,  $F(7, 309) = 10.80, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.20$ . Levene’s (2021) test also affirmed homogeneity of variances ( $p = 0.063$ ). Post hoc Games-Howell findings (Table 4) indicated that audiences favoring ESPN+, DAZN, YouTube and StarPlay watched more than viewers from beIN and SONY LIV ( $p < 0.01$ ). Group means appear in Table 5. These results support H2.

Platform-specific interpretations should be viewed cautiously due to the small subgroup sizes (e.g., Sony LIV,  $n = 6$ ; Shahid,  $n = 7$ ). Although pattern-indicative descriptive insights are augmented, inferential statements remain provisional. With larger platform sample data, the analysis can be replicated to increase the strength of comparative results. ESPN+ and DAZN are subscription platforms, and YouTube is an ad-supported platform. Payment causes commitment bias, potentially inflating reported engagement regardless of the portal’s featured aspects. This inference must be taken on board.

## 4.2 Moderation analyses

PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2021) was used to find out whether perceived interactivity moderated the correlation between viewership and engagement. Significant main effects of viewership ( $b = 0.65, p < 0.001$ ) and perceived interactivity ( $b = 0.63, p < 0.001$ ) were present. The interaction was nonsignificant ( $b = -0.08, p = 0.203$ ),

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the sample ( $N = 317$ ).

Variable	Categories	M	SD
Nationality	28 categories (largest: South African 52.1%)	-	-
Age	18–28 yrs. (36.9%), 29–39 yrs. (32.8%), 40–49 yrs. (16.1%), 50–59 yrs. (11.4%), Above 60 (2.8%)	2.10	1.11
Gender	Male (42.3%), Female (57.7%)	1.58	0.50
Media use frequency	Always (39.7%), Often (35.0%), Sometimes (25.2%)	1.85	0.79
Media platform preference	YouTube (37.9%), ESPN+ (29.7%), DAZN (14.5%), Others < 8%	2.86	1.66

TABLE 2 Games-Howell post hoc comparisons of engagement by viewership frequency ( $N = 317$ ).

Comparison (I-J)	Mean difference (I-J)	SE	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	p
Low vs. Medium	-1.25***	0.11	[-1.52, -0.98]	0.000
Low vs. High	-1.87***	0.12	[-2.15, -1.60]	0.000
Medium vs. High	-0.62***	0.10	[-0.86, -0.39]	0.000

TABLE 3 Means and standard deviations of engagement by viewership frequency.

Viewership frequency	n	M	SD
Low (1)	126	2.56	1.02
Medium (2)	111	3.80	0.73
High (3)	80	4.43	0.65
Total	317	3.47	1.14

TABLE 4 Games-Howell post hoc comparisons of engagement across platforms.

Comparison (I-J)	Mean difference (I-J)	SE	95% CI (Lower, Upper)	p
Platform 1-7	1.92***	0.26	[1.02, 2.83]	< 0.001
Platform 3-7	1.98***	0.24	[1.12, 2.84]	< 0.001
Platform 2-7	1.50**	0.24	[0.63, 2.36]	0.001
Platform 6-7	1.69***	0.32	[0.65, 2.73]	< 0.001

Only significant differences are shown. p-values based on the Games-Howell test. \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

TABLE 5 Means and standard deviations of engagement by preferred digital platform (N = 317).

Platform	n	M	SD
DAZN	46	3.80	0.97
YouTube	120	3.37	1.14
ESPN+	94	3.85	0.87
Shahid	7	2.00	1.32
Amazon Prime Sports	11	2.84	1.09
StarPlay	23	3.57	1.09
beIN	10	1.88	0.70
SONY LIV	6	1.83	1.51

TABLE 6 Moderation analysis predicting engagement from viewership frequency, perceived interactivity, and their interaction (N = 317).

Predictor	b	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	3.49	0.05	72.18	<0.001	[3.40, 3.59]
Viewership Frequency (X)	0.65	0.07	9.89	<0.001	[0.52, 0.78]
Perceived Interactivity (W)	0.63	0.06	10.72	<0.001	[0.52, 0.75]
X × W	-0.08	0.06	-1.28	0.203	[-0.20, 0.04]

TABLE 7 Moderation analysis predicting engagement from preferred platform, cultural proximity, and their interaction (N = 317).

Predictor	b	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	2.77	0.09	30.13	<0.001	[2.58, 2.95]
Platform 2 (YouTube) vs. 1 (DAZN) (X1)	0.98	0.12	8.29	<0.001	[0.75, 1.21]
Platform 3 (ESPN+) vs. 1(DAZN) (X2)	1.52	0.14	11.26	<0.001	[1.25, 1.79]
Cultural Proximity	0.63	0.08	8.11	<0.001	[0.48, 0.78]
X1 × CP	-0.16	0.16	-0.95	0.34	[-0.48, 0.17]
X2 × CP	-0.21	0.17	-1.27	0.21	[-0.54, 0.12]

$\Delta R^2 = 0.002$  (see Table 6). These findings suggest that although viewership and perceived interactivity individually increase engagement levels, perceived interactivity does not moderate the association between viewership and engagement. This null finding may reflect insufficient statistical power, measurement issues, or theoretical misspecification.

A second moderation analysis examined the role of cultural proximity (CP) in moderating platform preference and engagement. CP significantly predicted engagement ( $b = 0.63, p < 0.001$ ), as did platform preference ( $b = 0.98-1.52, p < 0.001$ ). None of the interaction terms were significant ( $p > 0.20$ ),  $\Delta R^2 = 0.003$ . These findings are tabulated in Table 7. These results indicated that while preferred platform and cultural proximity each predicted engagement, cultural

proximity itself does not moderate the interaction of preferred platform and engagement. The fact that the interaction terms were found to be non-significant implies that there are direct influences of cultural proximity and interactivity on engagement.

### 4.3 Measurement model (CFA)

The construct validity was examined via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The model had excellent fit:  $\chi^2(341) = 532.29, p < 0.001, CMIN/DF = 1.56, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.04,$  and  $GFI = 0.90$  according to standard cut-offs (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Three measures (PI1, CP1, BI2) were removed due to their standardized loadings of less than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019)

(Table 8). All other measures substantially (>0.70) and significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) loaded.

Scale reliabilities were high, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.82 to 0.91 (Thorndike, 1995). Composite reliabilities (CR) ranged from 0.84 to 0.93, all above 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Average variance extracted (AVE) was between 0.54 and 0.67, all above 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also reached: the square roots of each construct's AVE exceeded the correlations between it and other constructs. Reliability and validity measures are presented in Table 9.

### 4.4 Structural equation modeling and mediation

The structural model demonstrated good fit:  $\chi^2(355) = 668.87$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CMIN/DF = 1.88, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05,

GFI = 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Figure 2 presents the structural equation model with standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and significance levels ( $p < 0.05$ ). Solid lines denote supported hypotheses, while dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. This visual representation clarifies indirect and mediated relationships central to the theoretical model.

Supported direct effects of H3-H5: perceived interactivity ( $\beta = 0.77$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and cultural proximity ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) significantly predicted audience engagement; audience engagement predicted audience attitudes ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Attitudes significantly and negatively affected the behavioral intentions ( $\beta = -0.98$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), contrary to H6 which predicted a positive path.

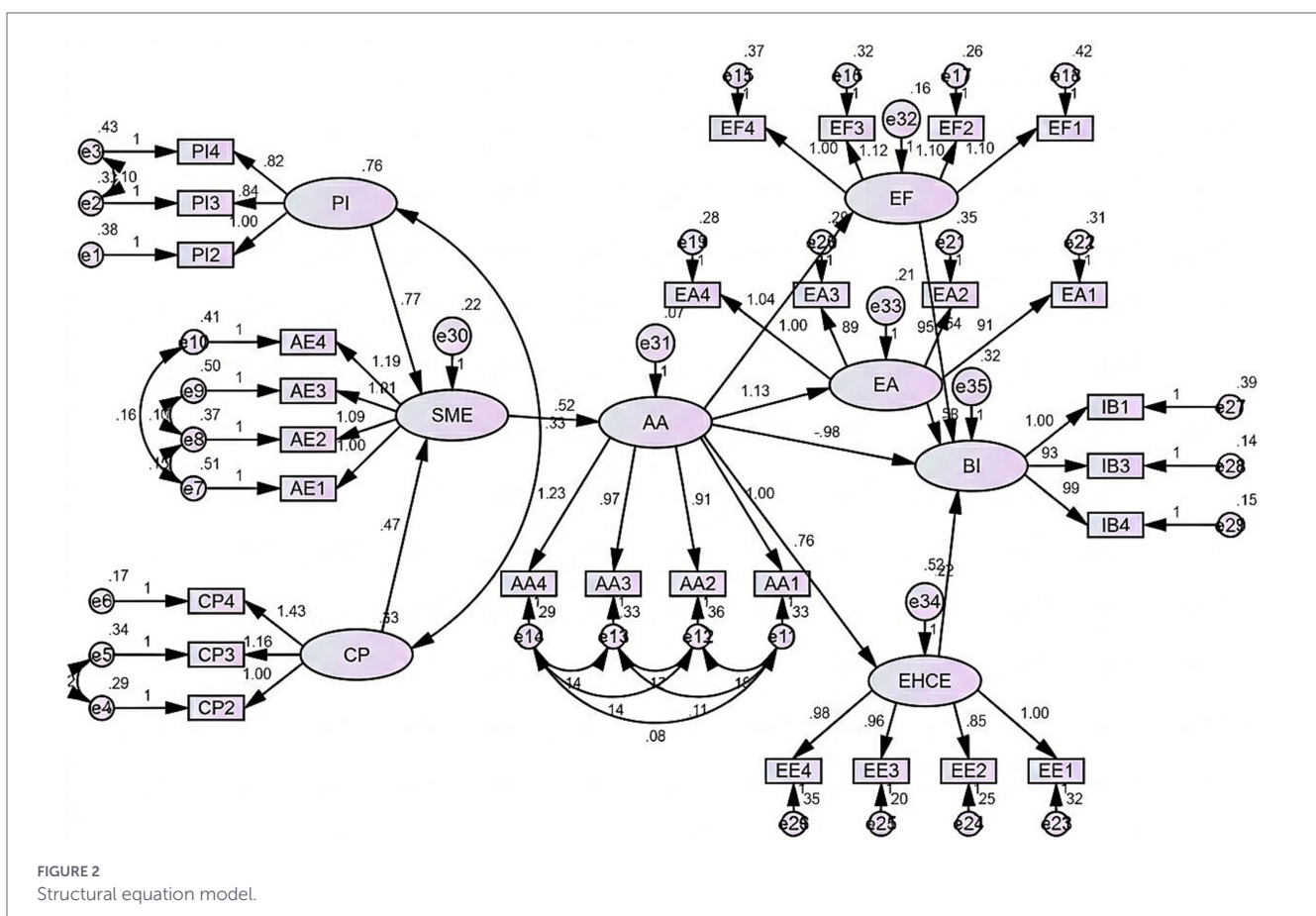
The significant negative coefficient from audience attitude to behavioral intention ( $\beta = -0.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) is worth treating with caution. Multicollinearity tests confirmed satisfactory variance inflation factors ( $VIF < 3$ ), suggesting that this coefficient reflects a genuine

TABLE 8 Factor loadings and Cronbach  $\alpha$ .

Construct (Cronbach $\alpha$ )	Statement	Factor Loading
Audience Engagement (AE) (0.931)	I spend much time watching Gulf-hosted sports events.	0.832
	These Gulf sports events hold my attention from start to finish.	0.885
	I feel emotionally excited when watching these events.	0.828
	I actively seek out additional content or commentary on Gulf-hosted sports events.	0.889
Perceived Interactivity (PI) (0.842)	Users' comments on streaming platforms enable me to stay informed about new Gulf-hosted sports events.	0.787
	The streaming platforms respond quickly to my interactions.	0.834
	I can easily share game-related videos, photos, or write comments.	0.794
Cultural Proximity (CP) (0.862)	I appreciate the regional traditions showcased in major sports events.	0.725
	I find Gulf sports events more enjoyable due to their local cultural context.	0.751
	I feel more emotionally involved when these events feature Gulf teams or athletes.	0.893
Audience Attitude Towards Media Coverage (AA) (0.903)	The streaming platforms provide reliable and in-depth coverage of Gulf mega sports events.	0.776
	The media coverage delivered through streaming platforms meets my expectations.	0.785
	I am satisfied with the variety of sports content offered through the streaming platforms.	0.831
	I enjoy how Gulf sports events are covered and presented on streaming platforms.	0.900
Enhanced Familiarity (EF) (0.875)	I am aware of recent developments and current events in the Gulf Countries.	0.777
	I can recognize key cultural symbols, values, and traditions of the Gulf Countries.	0.839
	I can describe what makes the Gulf Countries distinct from other regions.	0.820
	I believe the Gulf Countries have gained more global recognition in recent years.	0.764
Enhanced Appreciation (EA) (0.879)	I respect the political and cultural viewpoints expressed by the Gulf Countries.	0.797
	I like to share positive information about the Gulf Countries with others.	0.790
	I value the Gulf countries' contributions to international affairs in the MENA region.	0.797
	I view the Gulf countries as committed to promoting peace and cooperation with other nations around the world.	0.834
Enhanced Engagement (EE) (0.839)	I am open to learning more about the lifestyle and traditions of the Gulf countries.	0.721
	I am willing to recommend the Gulf Countries as a destination to my friends or colleagues.	0.752
	I like to follow media or online content related to the Gulf Country's culture or policies.	0.772
	I think the Gulf Countries are a valuable partner in global cultural exchange.	0.745
Behavioral Intention (BI) (0.870)	I am interested in visiting the Gulf Countries for tourism.	0.936
	I consider the Gulf Countries as a stable and reliable partner.	0.702
	I would consider relocating to the Gulf Countries in the future.	0.706

TABLE 9 Reliability, validity, and correlation statistics.

Constructs (C)	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	PI	AE	AA	EF	EA	EE	IB	CP
PI	0.847	0.648	0.635	0.433	0.805							
AE	0.918	0.738	0.629	0.442	0.793	0.859						
AA	0.894	0.680	0.635	0.431	0.797	0.776	0.824					
EF	0.877	0.641	0.534	0.393	0.641	0.731	0.716	0.801				
EA	0.880	0.648	0.558	0.441	0.650	0.661	0.683	0.680	0.805			
EE	0.835	0.559	0.558	0.360	0.581	0.507	0.532	0.576	0.747	0.748		
IB	0.829	0.622	0.442	0.241	0.455	0.405	0.337	0.434	0.596	0.665	0.789	
CP	0.835	0.629	0.468	0.354	0.621	0.684	0.638	0.555	0.623	0.554	0.464	0.793



behavioral pattern rather than a statistical artifact. Then again, the discovery could be an expression of competitive mediation processes and not simple inverse cause and effect. Further analysis showed that audience attitude partially mediates between engagement and behavioral intention. This process would mean that although engagement supports emotional attachment, the association processes through nuanced pathways where direct satisfaction impacts compete with building cultural capital's indirect impacts.

Bootstrap tests on mediation also indicated that attitude indirectly influenced behavioral intentions through increased familiarity (0.36,  $p < 0.01$ ), enhanced appreciation (0.58,  $p < 0.001$ ), and host-country engagement (0.52,  $p < 0.001$ ). Such indirect influences (as can be seen from Table 10) confirm competitive mediation where the direction of direct and indirect effects is working against one another's direction

(Zhao et al., 2010). Such pattern shows that attitudes to the media will reduce intentions via satisfaction substitution but increase them via the accretion of cultural capital.

### 4.5 Summary of hypothesis testing

The statistical results provide comprehensive support for the conceptual framework, demonstrating that viewership, interactivity, and cultural proximity serve as significant drivers of audience engagement and subsequent soft power outcomes as shown in Table 10. Viewership frequency on audiences strongly predicted engagement (H1) and significantly varied across digital platforms (H2). The CFA confirmed strong measurement validity and the structural model showed good fit. Direct effects also confirmed that perceived interactivity (H3) and

TABLE 10 Standardized path coefficients.

Hypothesis	Tested path/effect	Statistical test/estimate	Result
H1	Viewership → engagement	ANOVA, $F(2, 314) = 135.32, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.46$	Supported
H2	Platform → engagement	ANOVA, $F(7, 309) = 10.80, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.20$	Supported
H3	PI → engagement	SEM, $\beta = 0.77, p = 0.001$	Supported
H4	CP → engagement	SEM, $\beta = 0.47, p = 0.011$	Supported
H5	Engagement → attitude	SEM, $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$	Supported
H6	Attitude → behavioral intention	SEM, $\beta = -0.98, p = 0.002$	Not supported (strong negative effect found)
H7a	Attitude → EF → behavioral intention	Indirect $\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$	Supported (partial)
H7b	Attitude → EA → behavioral intention	Indirect $\beta = 0.58, p < 0.001$	Supported (partial)
H7c	Attitude → EE → behavioral intention	Indirect $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$	Supported (partial)

cultural proximity (H4) each positively predicted audience engagement and that engagement predicted audience attitudes (H5). Media attitudes negatively and directly affected behavioral intention (H6) but positively and indirectly affected it through increased familiarity (H7a), enhanced appreciation (H7b), and host-country engagement (H7c). Individual and combined, the model explained much variance in behavioral intention, which provided evidence about the explanatory power of the framework. Although H6 assumed that there would be a positive correlation between audience attitudes towards media coverage and behavioral intentions towards the host nation, the results of the SEM analysis indicated that there was a significant negative direct effect ( $\beta = -0.98, p = 0.002$ ). Thus, H6 cannot be supported. The negative correlation indicates that there is a mechanism of satisfaction substitution. Although the negative direct effect was found, the mediation analysis revealed the existence of positive indirect pathways through the mechanisms of increased familiarity, appreciation, and engagement.

## 5 Discussion

This research investigated the impact of sports events that occur in the Gulf region and involve audience engagement on digital streaming platforms and behavioral intentions of audience towards the GCC countries. The results shed light on how soft power operates in digital environments and reveal opposing links among media attitude and behavioral outcomes. Further, a dual-pathway model of digital sports diplomacy is developed that illustrates the manner in which successful projection of culture depends on the relative balance between the immediacy of gratification and the building up of cumulative cultural capital over the long run. The findings underscore that soft power effects in digitally mediated sports contexts are not driven by exposure alone, but by platform-enabled engagement processes that are specific to streaming environments. Engagement with quality sports-related content promotes familiarity, appreciation, and engagement with the host culture, which in turn produces a positive influence on behavioral intentions. However, while mediated experiences may pique cultural curiosity, the immediate impulse for physical engagement or travel may be diminished through a ‘satisfaction substitution’ effect. Rather, the appeal of the content is compliant with sociocultural principles of consumption, suggesting enjoyment through mediated experiences

that satisfy curiosity for culture while reducing the desire for immediate physical engagement.

### 5.1 Viewership, platforms, and engagement pathways

The findings should be interpreted with recognition that sports media engagement and host-country engagement represent analytically distinct constructs operating at different stages of the soft power process. Regular viewing of GCC-hosted sports is typically the most substantial factor for increasing the audience to engage, and accounts for almost half of the variance in observed differences. Engagement does not increase consistently; it increases precise intervals of viewing. Viewing GCC sports occasionally garners less interest, while viewing GCC sports frequently changes the viewer from passive viewing to active engagement in the form of sustained attention, emotional excitement, and the desire for more information about the viewing experience. However, this cross-sectional design cannot establish causation. Highly engaged individuals may self-select into frequent viewing, or they may simultaneously engage in both viewing and participating in sports fandom and its associated culture (Sutton and Knoester, 2022; Kim and Lee, 2025). Experimental designs manipulating viewership frequency would provide stronger causal evidence.

The engagement achieved by specialized sports platforms, such as ESPN+ or DAZN, was significantly higher than that of general entertainment platforms, including beIN or SonyLIV. This finding indicates that reach may not strictly lead to impact intensity. Differences between platforms are more likely to indicate selection effects rather than strictly platform capacities. Sports-focused streaming models suggest an underlying baseline of sports fandom, higher discretionary income, and increased levels of technological proficiency or savviness (Levental, 2025). Subscription models lead to commitment bias, where the involvement of payment to access the platform leads to a psychological form of investment. Given these dedicated features of the platforms, dedicated sport-streamers may also provide features that engage viewers, such as access to in-depth statistics, multiple camera angles, commentator analysis, or interactive elements not typically found in general sports viewing. The role of infrastructure significantly impacts the audience-based experience, and whether such a sports-related experience can lead to investment, which suggests that partnerships should be targeted more strategically, considering live-event hosting and/or production characteristics.

Perceived interactivity emerged as a strong predictor of engagement, with effects similar to those of frequency of viewing. However, interactivity did not moderate the benefits of frequency of viewing, indicating that while interactivity features may provide an additional source of engagement, they do not intensify the effects of engagement from viewing. This implies that two different consumer audiences derive engagement from distinct sources of viewing: frequent viewing or consumption through interactivity. Platforms cannot assume that interactive elements enhance engagement among existing viewers. Instead, they use interactivity to attract viewers from different contexts. Therefore, each audience segment will require a strategy that fosters both regular viewing habits and interactive participation as distinct objectives.

Cultural proximity displayed substantial predictive power for engagement while not exerting moderation effects related to the platform. Audiences with clearer cultural affinity showed increased engagement levels for all types of platforms, suggesting that cultural proximity is a stable individual difference rather than a superficial situational moderator. However, the scale that was used conflates familiarity through exposure with inherent cultural similarities. For example, respondents with South Asian heritage who score high on the scale might not actually have a high cultural affinity, which can reduce the differences between themselves and audiences due to geographic proximity and de-emphasized media exposure (Lu et al., 2019). Future studies may also want to differentiate the nuances of being familiar with the language used in their heritage, considering whether it is related to their heritage, shared values, and the potential value of knowledge gained through exposure. Regardless, the finding suggests that cultural understanding at the real level matters more than the technical features. Strategic policies should prioritize the cultivation of authentic cultural connections over superficial content tailoring. South Asian diaspora and African communities are highly receptive to Gulf sports diplomacy.

One surprising result is that there is a negative direct relationship between how the audience feels about media coverage and their intention of behavior toward the host region ( $\beta = -0.98, p = 0.002$ ). Note that this is a cross-sectional design and should be understood as a correlation rather than a cause. What is also interesting is that there are positive indirect relationships via familiarity, appreciation, and engagement, which suggests a competitive mediation pattern because the direct and indirect relationships are opposite in direction (Zhao et al., 2010).

High-quality sports broadcasting allows consumers to learn about the cultures of the GCC without the necessity of in-person visitation. This can be an unintentional outcome of effective cultural diplomacy. One potential explanation is the concept of satisfaction substitution, where the greater the mediated experience, the greater the ability of the experience to satisfy curiosity and, in turn, diminish the need for immediate in-person engagement. This is in line with emerging research on digitally mediated tourism and cultural consumption, which suggests that immersive experiences may partially replace physical engagement, rather than the other way around. In such a scenario, the audience may form positive judgments of the host country, but simultaneously feel that their curiosity/informational needs have already been satisfied. Digitally mediated tourism research has already demonstrated the distinction between complementary and substitution effects, where immersive experience can have differing effects on visit intention based on factors like perceived presence and psychological distance (Sarkady et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2026). Another

potential explanation is the concept of moral licensing, where the experience of mediated engagement can create symbolic credit, thus reducing the motivation for additional, higher-cost engagement; related research demonstrates the effect of reminding participants of previous positive behavior on reducing motivation for future behavior change, including air travel (Burger et al., 2022). Another potential explanation is the concept of resistance, where inferred strategic intent can lead to feelings of reactance, including anger, which is reliably associated with reduced persuasion effects; related research demonstrates the effect of critical frames on mega-event framing, offsetting the effects of inferred image management intent (Gerschewski et al., 2024; Li and Shi, 2026). Another potential explanation is the concept of avoidance, where mediated exposure can lead to feelings of anxiety, including information overload, which has been demonstrated as reducing travel intention in tourism media contexts (Huang et al., 2025).

Consistent with the processes described above, the model reveals a short-term conversion gap, where attitudes towards the coverage are directly related to less behavioral intention, while at the same time having positive indirect effects through familiarity, appreciation, and engagement. Such a finding implies that the effects of soft power can be mediated by non-linear and temporally differentiated routes in which favorable attitudes can lead to symbolic or cognitive engagement prior to behavioral change. This pattern is seen as supporting the view of parallel processes of gratification and long-run cultural capital accumulation, rather than a linear effect. A positive attitude towards the media allows for another way to comprehend differing cultures. This is a situation that creates a type of mediation where the direct and indirect effects work against each other (Zhao et al., 2010). Satisfaction in the short run can conflict with the long-term goal of developing cultural knowledge over time. Media behaviors can motivate either a reduction in desire to visit by providing substitutes or an increase in desire by adding to a person's knowledge and appreciation of the deeper meaning of an experience beyond short-term satisfaction. Although, eroded motivation could be temporary from instant gratification, appreciation can create stronger, longer-term positive feelings that ultimately could lead to action. The relationship through appreciation has the greatest influence on motivation - emotional connections inspire action more than simply awareness of something. This bi-dimensionality is also important in terms of planning for strategic soft power. Streaming platforms must provide cultural content that strikes a balance between current curiosity, based on content quality, and cultural content that engages over the long run. This requires a more important and strategic approach to provide a satisfying experience that melds with culture in the GCC, which was not present in the consumption-based media experience previously. The experience should be based on depicting hospitality and architectural success, as well as lifestyle intentions for future direct visits. This begs the question, which to prioritize? High-quality content can sometimes reduce people's desire to engage, so high production values may actually harm tourism and relocation efforts (Cogan, 2024; Gauttam et al., 2024; El-Dabt et al., 2025).

The complete mediation of perceived interactivity and cultural proximity with engagement and attitudes yields a definitive theoretical understanding. Neither technological affordances nor cultural similarity directly affects behavioral intentions. Rather, they are at work through multi-stage psychological processes, comprising engagement, attitude formation, and strengthened cultural mechanisms. Direct-effect models in the soft power and tourism literature are challenged

in light of this, as effective digital diplomacy depends on understanding multi-stage influence mechanisms, each of which warrants strategic focus. Gulf countries cannot rely solely on technological investment or cultural similarity for soft power effects. Platform capabilities and cultural resonance serve only to initiate processes of influence, which are short of behavioral outcomes and call for strategic planning with due attention to the cultivation of engagement, attitude formation, and specific routes whereby attitude equivalence signals intention.

## 5.2 Limitations and future research directions

Certain limitations constrain the interpretation of the findings and the extent to which they can be generalized to ‘international audiences’ in a broad sense. The overrepresentation of South African participants (52.1%) limits applicability to broader global audiences, particularly Latin American, East Asian, and European populations. However, this demographic pattern reflects genuine viewership trends among diaspora communities strategically important to GCC soft power initiatives. South African and South Asian audiences (India: 11%) represent key target populations for Gulf sports diplomacy due to historical migration patterns, cultural linkages, and economic ties. While this composition limits claims about universal soft power mechanisms, it strengthens ecological validity by capturing audiences most likely to engage with GCC-hosted events in real-world contexts. The Prolific platform’s typical demographic skew toward younger, digitally proficient populations may also limit generalizability to older or less digitally engaged audiences. Future research should employ stratified sampling across diverse cultural contexts and age groups to determine whether the dual-pathway model operates consistently across populations and to enhance the generalizability of findings.

Beyond sampling considerations, the GCC itself represents a theoretically distinctive context that constrains direct generalizability. The region’s political economy, governance structures, and media strategies differ substantially from other sports-hosting nations. Its unprecedented levels of state-directed sports investment, its demographic composition where expatriates outnumber nationals, and the politically motivated character of its soft power strategy create conditions unlikely to be replicated in contexts such as Brazil, Japan, or France. The satisfaction paradox and dual-pathway mediation structure identified here should therefore be treated as GCC-bound findings until cross-regional replication is established. Future research should examine whether similar engagement-to-intention pathways emerge in Western democracies, emerging markets, or contexts where sports diplomacy operates through non-state actors. Accordingly, the present study should be understood as providing context-specific evidence about digital soft power pathways in the GCC sports streaming environment rather than definitive claims about how such mechanisms operate across all international or non-Western publics.

The cross-sectional design can provide evidence of associations, but cannot support causal inferences. We cannot say for sure that viewership leads to engagement or that engagement leads to a positive attitude. Reverse causality is a reasonable alternative explanation—particularly regarding the negative relationship between media attitude and behavioral intention. It could be the case that people with low travel intent are compensating for not wanting to travel by consuming more media instead of reducing their satisfaction with the media, which leads to their reduced travel intentions. Furthermore, there is a

serious deficiency in the lack of control variables that accounted for prior visit history, prior knowledge of GCC, and travel propensity. These are likely to account for a lot of variances that is not captured by the theoretical constructs under examination. Panel studies that track people’s attitudes and intentions during sporting events could gauge how attitudes and intentions might change. Panel studies could also show us the order of these changes. In the meantime, experimental studies where the frequency of viewership, the affordances of platforms, or cultural content are manipulated can demonstrate more convincing causal evidence.

The absence of moderating effects indicates that the current models only partially represent the full scope of digital soft power. Future research should determine whether engagement occurs in different ways in the digital space compared to traditional forms of diplomacy. Mixed-method designs, which integrate quantitative modeling and semi-structured interviews among expatriates with high levels of engagement and low behavioral intention, could reveal latent environmental and psychological barriers underlying the satisfaction-intention paradox. The measurement of cultural proximity represents a significant limitation requiring acknowledgment. Although we conceptually critique cultural proximity as multidimensional (encompassing linguistic similarity, religious congruence, heritage connections, geographic proximity, and affective bonds), our empirical measurement captures only the affective/emotional dimension. This unidimensional operationalization was theoretically justified given research demonstrating that emotional connection to cultural symbols most strongly predicts sustained media engagement (Tsiotsou, 2015). However, it limits our ability to determine whether other dimensions of cultural proximity would show similar, stronger, or distinct effects on engagement and soft power outcomes. Future research should use multidimensional cultural proximity scales to measure separate aspects like language, values, heritage, geography, and emotional connection. This approach would help identify which factors most influence engagement in digital sports diplomacy, and whether they act alone or together. Such differentiation can reveal, for example, that heritage ties may foster emotional engagement without language similarity, or that geography can affect emotional bonds. Clarifying these dimensions will advance cultural proximity theory beyond its current ambiguity.

Future studies should also examine whether the satisfaction paradox varies with content type. Does high-value cultural content always reduce behavioral motivation in the short run, or only certain types? Comparison studies between sports and other cultural programs can help determine the boundary conditions of the substitution effect. The model also needs to account for critical perspectives of Gulf sports investment in reputation laundering (‘sports washing’). The satisfaction paradox can account for audience recognition of strategic image building that produces cognitive dissonance in their media enjoyment and desire for travel (Skey, 2023). Audiences can view content with skepticism about the host nations’ motives, producing the observed negative direct effect. Future research should measure sports washing recognition and test whether it moderates the relations among media attitude and behavioral outcomes.

## 5.3 Practical implications and theoretical contributions

Although the structural relationships identified in this study align with broader soft power theory, their manifestation is embedded within the particular institutional and cultural configuration of the

GCC. The strategic deployment of mega sports events in this region reflects a state-coordinated branding logic that may differ substantially from liberal democratic or commercially driven sport ecosystems. The theoretical contributions of this study should therefore be understood as analytically transferable to comparable contexts—where sport, digital media, and nation branding intersect under state-coordinated conditions—rather than as a universally invariant framework. These are context-sensitive propositions that invite replication, not universal claims about the dynamics of digital sports diplomacy. Within these contextual and theoretical boundaries, the practical implications of the findings become more precise and strategically instructive.

These findings provide clear direction on how to best leverage Gulf sports as instruments of soft power, while being conscious of the tensions that come from empirical findings and strategic recommendations. The dual-pathway model illustrates that investment priorities must be distinguished based on whether organizations emphasize behavioral outputs in the short-term or the development of cultural capital in the long-term. To attain long-term diplomatic objectives, it would be reasonable for governments to place an emphasis on experience rather than promotion for producing quality content and sophisticated representations of cultural objects. This encourages appropriating value in that culture and supports genuine narratives rather than empty marketing. However, the more complicated planning process emerges when countries would like the immediate benefit of tourism and/or relocation, knowledge which would feed into the satisfaction paradox. In some cases, streaming services wishing to promote short-term behavioral intentions might be disappointed to find that altering content quality to enable curiosity rather than satisfying curiosity would yield better results. This contradictory finding is interesting but should be studied further before proceeding with strategic directives.

It is important for additional investment to focus on enhancing platform functionalities, as well as on interactive elements, due to the impacts associated with each of them. Gulf countries need to develop sport-specific broadcasting infrastructure rather than simply relying on existing general platforms, although one should always exercise caution in interpretation, considering a selection bias. Interactive features are important since different and enhanced engagement strategies are developed for the content. Investment should focus on engaging targeted audiences who have a stronger association with high culture and who have shown interest in GCC sports content that exists among South Asian and African diaspora communities. Organizations should develop strategies for the satisfaction paradox by thinking about how to increase people's engagement incrementally. Content should create a pleasurable watching experience while employing elements of Gulf culture and society that the audience does not necessarily appreciate through the mediated experience itself, such as hospitality practices which require first-hand experience; architectural wonders which are best appreciated as a physical experience; or aspects of lifestyle that encourage travel. Tourism authorities should develop distinct ways to transition people from watching the media to visiting places. This could occur through specific actions, such as offering some travel promotion to viewers, incorporating travel logistics and information for the audience, or developing partnerships that connect the sports fan with travel opportunities.

This research contributes to theory in three main ways. First, it suggests that digital soft power operates through two processes that yield opposite effects, rather than a one-way influence process. This competitive mediation pattern challenges the linear models that dominate much of the current research, suggesting that a successful soft power

strategy needs to balance quick gratification and sustained engagement, rather than maximize content quality. Second, the study found that technology and culture operated as separate, parallel processes and not as contributing moderators. The lack of moderating effects was surprising, given the expectation that interactivity would enhance viewership effects or that cultural closeness would affect the platform effects. This suggests that the mechanisms of soft power are far more isolated than interconnected, and require altogether different strategic approaches, formulated for each pathway. Third, the comprehensive mediation model shows that soft power outcomes are the product of multi-step psychological processes that require consideration of intermediate mechanisms. Neither technological tools nor cultural closeness yield behavioral intentions directly; rather, they set off a series of effects through engagement and attitude formation. Finally, the final outcomes all depend upon the added consideration of the satisfaction paradox.

## 6 Conclusion

This research improves our understanding of how the consumption of sports in digital formats produces observable nation branding outcomes, by demonstrating that the mechanism does so through competing dual pathways, rather than a direct linear effect. Findings show that frequency of viewing and platform choice increase engagement, while perceptions of interactivity and cultural proximity enhance engagement independently. The study also draws attention to competing mediation in that positive media perceptions reduce short-term behavioral intention (due to satisfaction effects) but also contribute to the construction of cultural capital in the longer term, which increases behavioral intentions through the mechanisms of appreciation.

This pattern places emphasis on the notion that effective cultural diplomacy necessitates the management of the idea of reprieve in the moment with ongoing curiosity. A quality sports experience engenders a sense of familiarity, enjoyment, and involvement that may indirectly lead to behavioral intentions. However, the experience of enjoyment provided by sports content may also mitigate some of the immediacy of the desire to pursue direct cultural engagement through substitution effects. Thus, it is critical to understand and navigate this tension in order to accelerate the potential impact of digital sports as tools of soft power. The findings here reinforce that effective cultural engagement requires multi-phase methods by which considerations of platform choice, quality of content, interactivity features, authentic conceptualizations of culture, and deeper engagements must all be considered. Assuming a direct linear relationship between activities and behavior is insufficient; rather, a nuanced understanding of the complex psychological processes underlying mediated soft power is required.

The study measures self-reported intentions instead of actual behaviors or policy outcomes. There is often a huge disparity between what people say they would do or intend to do and what they actually do in behavioral studies. Therefore, this study focuses on psychological mechanisms rather than the direct effects on visitation, investment, or diplomatic allegiance. It is anticipated that GCC states that are trying to use sport as a form of diplomacy will develop complex ways to consider the multiple independent pathways by which consuming culture digitally might influence global attitudes and behavioral intentions. The study relies on cross-sectional survey data and self-reported intentions, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences and to

observe actual behavioral or policy outcomes. In addition, the contextual and sample characteristics constrain the scope of generalization. Accordingly, future research should employ longitudinal, experimental, or behavioral data to test the stability, directionality, and causal robustness of the proposed relationships.

Despite these limitations, the dual-pathway model advances a theoretically grounded explanation of how digital sports diplomacy operates within contemporary media environments. By identifying both reinforcing and countervailing psychological mechanisms, the framework clarifies why soft power effects do not unfold as simple linear processes, but instead emerge through competing pathways that simultaneously enable and constrain behavioral intention formation. Although the dual-pathway logic may be analytically transferable to other cultural or geopolitical settings, its empirical validation in this study is confined to GCC-related sports content, digitally mediated viewing, and a specific configuration of international audiences. Replication across alternative national brands, media ecosystems, and political contexts is therefore necessary before broader generalization can be warranted.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) at Symbiosis International University, Dubai. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

PM: Data curation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. TM: Visualization, Data curation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. NS: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. DH: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. FZ: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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