

## Sporting Diplomacy: The Role of International Players in Enhancing Saudi Arabia's Nation Branding and International Public Relations (PR) Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of international player signings in the Saudi Pro League (SPL) as a strategic tool for enhancing Saudi Arabia's nation branding and international public relations (PR) strategies. The research is grounded in theoretical frameworks including Sporting Diplomacy Theory, Nation Branding Theory, Soft Power Theory, Public Relations Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Global Media and Communication Theories. Through qualitative analysis of global news articles, reviews, and academic sources, the study examines the impact of high-profile international players joining the SPL on Saudi Arabia's international image and soft power. The findings reveal that the SPL's international signings have led to increased visibility, media coverage, and social media engagement for both the league and the country. These signings foster cultural exchange, intercultural dialogue, and positive perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a diverse and dynamic nation. Moreover, the study suggests that the use of football and renowned players as cultural ambassadors contributes to Saudi Arabia's strategic communication goals and nation branding efforts. The research concludes with recommendations for further leveraging the SPL's international signings to enhance Saudi Arabia's global image, soft power, and diplomatic relations. The study contributes to the understanding of how sports, particularly football, can serve as an effective tool for nation branding and international PR strategies, offering insights for governments, institutions, and stakeholders seeking to strengthen their global presence.

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### Introduction

Nations from all over the world strive to assert their presence on the global stage through strategic international public relations efforts. International relations, shaped by power dynamics and effective communication, play a pivotal role in shaping a country's image and reputation [1]. Public relations, in the context of a country, involves the deliberate and strategic management of communication between the nation and its diverse audiences, both domestic and international. It encompasses shaping narratives, disseminating information, and fostering positive relationships to effectively position the country within the global community. According to White governments and institutions undertake deliberate efforts to manage their public image and foster positive perceptions among foreign audiences [2]. At its core, international PR involves a multifaceted approach that combines communication, strategic messaging, and cultural diplomacy to establish fruitful relationships and influence international opinions. By engaging in public diplomacy campaigns, countries seek to create mutual understanding, enhance collaboration, and position themselves as favorable partners in global affairs [3].

Among the countries seeking to bolster their international standing, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) emerges as a prominent player, employing various public relations techniques to showcase its cultural richness, economic prowess, and geopolitical significance. KSA holds significant international standing due to its economic influence as a major oil exporter, regional leadership within the

Arab world, and its strategic location at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa [4]. The country's diplomatic initiatives and partnerships with various nations also contribute to its prominence [5, 6]. To 'protect, promote, perform and prove' itself in the global arena and garner respect, cooperation, and support on the global stage KSA is using various strategies to protect its cultural heritage, economic achievements, humanitarian endeavors, and geopolitical influence. This paper explores how KSA is constructing its global profile. Specifically, the paper looks at the role and impact of Saudi Pro League's international signings on the Kingdom's international PR strategies. Statement of the problem.

### Review of Literature

#### Sport as a Source of "Soft Power" in International Public Relations

According to Grix & Houlihan, sport has emerged as a potent tool for projecting "soft power" in international public relations, enabling countries like the UK, USA, and other European nations to enhance their global influence [7]. Prominent sports leagues such as the English Premier League (EPL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), Serie A, La Liga, and Bundesliga have become international spectacles, attracting millions of viewers worldwide [8]. By broadcasting these sporting events globally, these countries effectively showcase their culture, values, and way of life to a diverse audience, thereby strengthening their positive international image. Besides, top athletes who compete in these leagues act as cultural ambassadors, promoting their countries' identities

and contributing to the soft power appeal [9]. For instance, star basketball players such as Michael Jordan in the NBA become global icons, enhancing the image of the USA as a nation with exceptional athletic talent and cultural significance [10].

Not only developed countries, but also developing countries from Africa, the Middle East, South America, and Asia are harnessing sports to bolster their international relations and soft power. For example, Kenyan athletes, particularly in long-distance running, have achieved remarkable success in international competitions like the Olympics and major marathons. Through their exceptional performances, Kenyan athletes have brought pride to their nation and have become symbols of determination, endurance, and success [11]. This success on the international stage has attracted attention to Kenya and positively influenced its image, showcasing the country as a hub of athletic excellence and a land of remarkable talent. Such positive perceptions help to create an environment where international audiences are more inclined to engage with the country, its culture, and its economic opportunities, ultimately contributing to improved diplomatic ties and soft power for the country on the global stage [12]. As such, sports serve as a unique and influential platform for countries to shape their international relations and foster positive perceptions of their nations worldwide, making it an essential component of their soft power strategies [13].

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for this research on sporting diplomacy and nation branding through international player signings in Saudi Arabia encompasses key theories that help understand the complex relationship between sports, diplomacy, and public relations in enhancing a country's image on the global stage. This framework aims to provide a theoretical lens through which the impact of international player signings on Saudi Arabia's nation branding and international PR strategies can be analyzed. The following are the key theories: By combining these key theories, the research can delve into the intricate dynamics

### **Sporting Diplomacy theory**

Sporting diplomacy theory posits that sports can serve as a powerful tool in fostering international relations and promoting a country's image and values [14]. The theory suggests that engaging in sports exchanges, hosting international events, and recruiting foreign athletes can contribute to building bridges between nations, enhancing cultural understanding, and projecting a positive national identity [15]. In the context of this study, sporting diplomacy theory forms the basis for understanding how Saudi Arabia strategically utilizes international player signings in its football league as part of its diplomatic efforts [16, 17].

### **Nation Branding theory**

Nation Branding Theory focuses on the deliberate construction and communication of a country's image to the international community. It emphasizes how a country can strategically shape perceptions, values, and associations in the minds of global audiences [18]. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the theory helps to explain how the country aims to use the Saudi Pro League's international signings to enhance its nation branding efforts by projecting specific attributes, values, and cultural elements [17].

### **Soft Power theory**

Soft Power Theory, as proposed by Joseph Nye, argues that a country's attractiveness, culture, and values can influence the behavior and preferences of other nations without resorting to

coercion or force [18]. Through its football league's international signings, Saudi Arabia can leverage soft power to create goodwill, strengthen relationships, and increase its global influence. Understanding Soft Power Theory is essential in comprehending how the presence of international players in the league can positively impact Saudi Arabia's international standing and public perception [19].

### **Public Relations theory**

Public relations theory focuses on how organizations and governments manage their communication and relationships with different stakeholders [20]. In this study, Public Relations Theory is relevant to examine how Saudi Arabia's sports communication and PR strategies work in tandem with the signing of international players to create a favorable perception of the country, both domestically and internationally [21].

### **Social Identity theory**

Social identity theory posits that individuals derive a part of their identity from the social groups they belong to [22]. In the context of sporting diplomacy, this theory helps to understand how the inclusion of international players in the Saudi Pro League influences fans' identification with their teams and, by extension, their national identity. It sheds light on how Saudi football fans may perceive their country's image and values through the performance and representation of foreign players [23].

### **Global Media and Communication theories**

Global Media and Communication Theories are relevant to understand how the international media covers the Saudi Pro League's international signings and how such coverage shapes global perceptions of Saudi football and the country as a whole. The agenda-setting theory and framing theory are particularly useful in analyzing how media representations influence public opinion about Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts through sports [22].

### **Research question**

This paper seeks to answer the following question: How do the international signings in the Saudi Pro League contribute to the enhancement of Saudi Arabia's nation branding and international public relations strategies, exemplifying the concept of sporting diplomacy?

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodology employed for the research aims to explore the relationship between the presence of international players in the Saudi Pro League and its impact on Saudi Arabia's nation branding and international public relations efforts. The chosen methodology for this study is qualitative research, primarily relying on data collected from global news articles, reviews, and opinions about Saudi Arabia before and after the signing of high-profile players in the Saudi Pro League. Additionally, the study will draw insights from academic journals, books, and past studies related to sporting diplomacy and nation branding.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis and Sources**

The data collection and analysis methods for this qualitative study are described below. The primary sources of data for this research include:

- **Global News Articles and Opinions**  
A systematic search will be conducted to gather news articles,

editorials, and opinions from reputable international media outlets. The focus will be on articles related to Saudi Arabia's football scene and its nation branding efforts before and during the period after signing high-profile international players in the Saudi Pro League.

- **Reviews and Coverage of Sporting events**

Analysis of reviews and media coverage of Saudi Pro League matches, especially those featuring international players, will provide insights into the public perception of the league and its impact on Saudi Arabia's image.

- **Academic Journals and Books**

Scholarly articles, books, and past studies related to sporting diplomacy, nation branding, and the role of sports in public relations will be consulted to gain theoretical insights and context.

### Data Analysis

- **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis will be applied to the collected data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the impact of international players on Saudi Arabia's nation branding and international PR strategies.

- **Interpretation and Synthesis**

The data will be interpreted and synthesized to draw meaningful conclusions, linking the findings to the theoretical framework and research objectives. Ethical Considerations

- **Data Usage and Copyright**

Proper attribution will be given to all sources used in the study, and copyright guidelines will be followed to respect the intellectual property rights of authors and publishers.

- **Data Validity**

The authenticity and reliability of data from reputable sources will be ensured to maintain the credibility of the research findings.

### Limitations

While qualitative research offers valuable insights, there are certain limitations associated with this methodology. One potential limitation is the potential for bias in news articles and opinions, which may affect the accuracy of the information collected. Additionally, relying on secondary sources may limit the researchers' ability to explore the perspectives of specific stakeholder groups directly.

### Findings and Discussion

#### SPL International Signings as KSA Public Relation tool

Anani-Bossman & Mudzanani suggest that national public relation is about satisfying, optimizing, and maximizing the process of meaning creation using relational, informational, discursive, and persuasive interventions by co-producing public legitimization [24]. KSA has tapped into this philosophy and is anchoring its public relation through soft power being generated through the attraction and influence of its Pro League. In recent years, the Saudi Pro League (SPL) has emerged as an unexpected but compelling tool in Saudi Arabia's international PR toolkit. The Kingdom aims to leverage the popularity and global appeal of sports to extend its influence and reshape perceptions abroad by strategically signing renowned football players from diverse regions. Such international signings not only enhance the competitiveness of the SPL but also create new avenues for cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue. This section looks at how this league has helped to improve KSA's brand name and create a focal point through which the world can see this country.

#### Overview of KSA Pro League and International Signings

SPL is ranked amongst the best leagues in the world based on its competitiveness, financial rewards on offer, the quality of football, and the global appeal of its star players. The league ranks as the highest division of association football in the Saudi league system. It features 16 teams but from the 2023/24 season, it will have 18 teams. SPL is often ranked with the highest coefficient in Asia because of the consistent and successful performances of SPL teams in the AFC champion's leagues [25]. To bolster its position in the world, SPL clubs have embarked on significant international signings.

Fueled by enticing deals, this league has successfully attracted some of the finest and highly ranked players in the world. Notably, Al-Nassr secured on January 2023 what is arguably one of the greatest transfers made by an Asian club by signing Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United for a deal worth \$75m per year. Other SPL teams have also secured signings of high-profile players [26]. For example, Al-Ahli has signed Riyad Mahrez from Manchester City for a fee of £30 million and Roberto Firmino from Liverpool, Al-Ettifaq have signed Jordan Henderson from Liverpool for £12 million, and Karim Benzema and N'Golo Kante have been signed by Al Ittihad from Real Madrid Chelsea respectively. Other high-profile players signings into the SPL include Neymar Júnior from PSG by Al Hilal, Sadio Mané from Bayern Munich by Al Nassr, Edouard Mendy from Chelsea by Al Ahli, Ruben Neves from Wolves by Al Hilal, Jota by Al Ittihad from Celtic, Kalidou Koulibaly by Al Hilal from Chelsea, Marcelo Brozovic by Al Nassr from Inter Milan, and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic signing by Al Hilal from Lazio [27].

At the heart of this high-profile signing spree into Saudi's high-flying league, is the strategy to position the league amongst the top in the world, increase the revenue generated from the league, and improve the overall quality of the football in the country. However, nationally, the high-profile signings is another vital role-making Saudi Arabia more visible in the world. According to The Sporting Blog, football is the most popular sport in the world with over 3.5 billion fans and players (across all ages, gender, and geographical location) [28]. KSA has realized that one of the best ways to promote and enhance its global brand name is to expose itself to where the majority of the people are – in Football. According to Snow targeting the largest market or audience is a fundamental pillar of successful public relations [3]. The effectiveness of any public relations campaign relies on understanding the target audience and tailoring the messaging and communication strategies to resonate with them. When it comes to international public relations, this principle becomes even more crucial, as countries seek to engage with diverse global audiences while ensuring their message is well-received and relevant across cultural boundaries.

Football achieves this subtle yet effective promotion of the nation by indirectly fostering cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue, while directly showcasing the country's domestic football prowess and attracting global attention, ultimately shaping positive perceptions of a country on the international stage [8]. Through the Saudi Pro League's international signings, the sport creates opportunities for cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to come together and share experiences. As foreign players join local clubs, they bring with them not just their football skills but also their unique cultures and traditions, enriching the country's social fabric. This subtle yet impactful interaction fosters a sense of openness and mutual

understanding, enhancing Saudi Arabia's image as a nation that embraces diversity and values global connections [29].

On the other hand, football's direct impact on the nation's image is equally significant. As the Saudi Pro League garners attention from football enthusiasts worldwide, the spotlight shines on the Kingdom's footballing prowess and achievements. Successful international signings attract media coverage and fan interest, drawing attention to the country's sporting achievements and infrastructure [9]. This positive exposure reinforces the perception of Saudi Arabia as a progressive and dynamic nation, capable of competing at the highest level of global sports. Moreover, the reach of football as a global sport cannot be underestimated. As matches are broadcasted internationally and fans engage through social media, Saudi Arabia's positive portrayal extends far beyond its borders. This broadens the nation's influence, facilitating diplomatic opportunities and fostering an environment conducive to international collaboration [3].

### **Impact of the Signings on KSA International Image**

SPL has experienced significant growth over the years, but the signing of top players in the world has ignited the highest interest in this league. For example, after Ronaldo joined Al Nassr, Saudi Professional League appointed a sports management agency - International Management Group (IMG), to sell the media rights for the completion and in just one week IMG managed to secure rights agreements to show the SPL in 36 territories. Some of the major partners that came into play include Claro in Mexico, Sports TV in Portugal, S Sport in Turkey, and Cosmote in Greece [30]. Also, after Ronaldo arrived in Riyadh, Al Nassr's social media started to surge with flowers from all over the world. The official Instagram account of Al Nassr saw growth in users from 850,000 to 11 million [25]. The SPL has been receiving high international reporting since the signing.

According to Kieran Maguire, a soccer finance expert, instead of trying to rival major leagues in Europe signing of key stars in SPL is a "marketing exercise" which allows the kingdom to diversify its commercial appeal beyond natural resources [31]. Players such as Cristiano Ronaldo have huge following and social media than that of an individual football club in SPL. Rudi Garcia, the coach of Al-Nassr noted that in the first week of the 2023 season, he was very surprised by the sheer number of people from the press who were present at the press conference. He noted that normally he was used to seeing only three or four journalists, but the press conference changed significantly as many new signings continued to join the SPL clubs [32]. According to SkySports, it is increasingly becoming common to see young people in countries such as Portugal and France wearing T-shirts for such clubs as Al Nassr [27]. This has a considerable impact on the visibility of not only the affected clubs but also Saudi Arabia as a country.

Based on the reported impact of having high-profile players in the SPL, it is evident that the signing of top players from around the world in the SPL has been a strategic move that leverages public relations theory to positively impact Saudi Arabia's international relations and enhance its soft power. By attracting global football stars, the SPL has experienced unprecedented growth and international attention, creating a ripple effect that goes beyond the realm of sports and into the realms of media, social media, and cultural influence [12]. Public relations theory emphasizes the importance of effective communication, strategic messaging, and cultural diplomacy to shape positive perceptions among foreign audiences. The SPL's decision to sign top players

aligns with this theory by utilizing the sport as a powerful tool for showcasing Saudi Arabia's dynamism and progressive image on the global stage. The success of the league in securing media rights agreements in multiple territories is a testament to the effectiveness of this approach [9]. Partnering with major broadcasters in various countries not only expands the league's viewership but also promotes Saudi Arabia's brand and soft power in those regions.

The impact of star players like Cristiano Ronaldo joining the SPL extends to social media, where they command massive followings. Al Nassr's significant growth on Instagram highlights how these high-profile signings attract global attention and elevate the league's profile. The surge in international reporting on the SPL further amplifies Saudi Arabia's presence in the global media landscape, contributing to the country's image as a vibrant and progressive nation [28]. The move to attract top football stars also demonstrates a strategic shift for Saudi Arabia in diversifying its commercial appeal beyond its traditional reliance on natural resources. By investing in football and leveraging the fame of renowned players, the Kingdom enhances its global recognition and creates a new avenue for economic engagement and international partnerships. Furthermore, the visibility of the SPL and its clubs in foreign markets, such as Portugal and France, where young people are seen wearing T-shirts of Saudi clubs, is a testament to the soft power impact [23]. Football serves as a cultural bridge, allowing Saudi Arabia to forge connections and foster positive perceptions among diverse international audiences.

The signing of football stars may not have necessarily resulted in their respective clubs excelling in the league, as evidenced by Ronaldo's limited success in helping Al Nassr win the league. However, these acquisitions have significantly elevated the visibility and profile of both the clubs and the entire league. Research suggests that individuals tend to develop positive sentiments and affiliations with people and countries they admire, exemplified by the favorable perception of the UK following its successful EPL league [33]. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's football soft diplomacy is gradually shaping a more positive narrative and perception of the country. Traditionally perceived as a conservative society with limited emphasis on gender equality and marginalized communities, the SPL's growing international appeal is providing global audiences with a more positive outlook on Saudi Arabia. This enhanced image positions the country not only as a regional hub but also as a key global influencer in economic, religious, and social spheres.

### **Future outlook**

Many SPL clubs are signing players from renowned European, American, Asia, and even African leagues. The SPL does not have a limitation on how much a club can spend on the players. This makes the league very competitive and rewarding for top players in the world. At the same time, the Saudi government is on a move to privatize SPL clubs which have been historically under the Ministry of Sports and were mainly funded by the state. The privatization move is signaled by an announcement on June 2023 that the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund (Public Investment Fund (PIF) which is overseen by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would take over four big domestic football clubs: Al Nassr, Al Hilal, Al Ittihad and Al Ahli [26]. This is meant to encourage sport growth and further attract investment and participation of global investors in KSA sports. Having international investors will help make the clubs more financially stable and professional, improve their competitiveness by upgrading the infrastructure, and create an appealing investment environment [26]. Growing the

league would make it more appreciable across the world which would increase international coverage, fan base, and visibility. All this will elate the position of KSA in the global political, social, economic, trade, and other influential spheres.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that there has been increased visibility of KSA after the unprecedented acquisition of football stars from top-flight leagues in the world such as EPL, LaLiga, and Bundesliga. This has made the SPL more known in the world and the level of influence that players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Benzema, Mendy, and Kante bring spills even to their countries of origin. This creates more global appeal for KSA. Politically, this amasses more soft power for the country which can be used to influence various global agendas. As such, the signing of renowned football players into the SPL not only improves the quality of KSA's top-flight league but also helps the country in building strong brand capital internationally.

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