
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Morocco's Football Diplomacy and Soft Power Projection: Reading Morocco Through The Guardian

Rachid Enaim

Ibn Tofail University. Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, Kenitra

Corresponding Author: Rachid Enaim, **E-mail:** Rachid.enaim@uit.ac.ma

ABSTRACT

This article presents evidence of the role of sports diplomacy in advancing national image, soft power, and foreign policy objectives through examining Morocco's performance in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. This study argues that sporting events, particularly successful ones, can enhance the country's symbolic and political capital. The article develops its own view of soft power through sport's achievement by winning the hearts and minds of foreign audiences worldwide. This matches Morocco's cultural diplomacy, which aims to spread the nation's image/ reputation beyond borders, especially nowadays when there is fierce competition for public opinion through soft power instruments. This study assumes that international relations are subject to ongoing changes, and small nations can use their intangible capital to consolidate their international position.

KEYWORDS

Sports diplomacy, soft power, nation branding, cultural diplomacy, narratives, media coverage, symbolic capital

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Introduction

The 2022 FIFA World Cup is a turning point in Morocco's manipulation of sports' achievements, especially football, as an effective soft power tool. In fact, this great accomplishment is more than athletic success. It is a strategic transformation in Morocco's approach to soft power to win foreign audiences' minds and hearts. Being in the World Cup semifinals paves the way for promoting Morocco's image and reputation overseas. Trunkos and Heere argue that "in today's increasingly interconnected international system, countries try to utilize their diplomatic assets to their fullest. Sport can play an important role in this process, because of its universal popularity and its ability to serve as common ground between nations" (1). In this context, Morocco relies on such sporting milestones to advance its foreign policy objectives, such as being a continental leader and attracting international investment in various domains. This article is an endeavor to address three main questions:

1. How has Morocco benefited from its success in the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup to promote its image worldwide?
2. To what extent does the country translate football success into concrete diplomatic gains?
3. What long-term implications can Morocco benefit from football diplomacy to enhance its international positioning?

Soft power

Power has always been at the center of all debates around the theme of international relations. Many intellectuals worthy of the name have come up with different views, each one according to their beliefs and principles. A lot of scholars agree that power can be defined as the ability to have an impact on others to get the desired results. However, they differ in the way power is exercised. Some think that power can be exercised directly through violence; others believe that it is possible to practice power through other means, like attraction. Joseph Nye is an American Harvard University professor who has talked about power in its wider and specific

senses. His ideas are based on the assumption that globalization, culture, and political values are very important components of modern power. This means that elements of power have become less concrete. Nye comes up with a new view of power. He is strongly convinced that countries, especially after the Cold War, have modified their viewpoints on power. Instead of violence and military attacks, countries resort to using attraction through cultural forms. This is what he refers to as "the second face of power". Nye defines the second face of power as:

A country may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects. In this case, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situation in world politics as it is to get others to change in particular situations. This aspect of power -getting others to want what you want -might be called indirect or co-optive power. It is in contrast to the active command power behavior of getting others to do what you want. Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one's idea or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express.... The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength. (267).

Later, Nye shifts the second face of power to soft power. Nye first introduced the latter in a book entitled *Bound to Lead*. To him, soft power has had negative connotations. It was, first and foremost, used to describe American hegemony to maintain international leadership. Soft power is a strategy that leads to attaining long-term objectives without using hard power forms. There should be a distinction between soft power and influence. Influence may also be the outcome of the use of hard power through threats and sanctions (Nye, 2004). He also uses soft power interchangeably with attractive power. The soft power of a nation includes a lot of elements, such as values, culture, and so on. Soft power's importance stems from the fact that target groups of people have always shown a great deal of resistance against all forms of hard power. The Japanese case is a good example of the impacts of soft power on other nations. People all over the world tend to accept Japanese ways of life easily because Japan does not involve itself in areas of conflict. Japanese foreign policy makers make good use of their culture to convince other nations. The country is less concerned with military interventions. Some countries, especially America, use information resources as a means of soft power. In today's world of globalization, military force is no longer the only source of power. Information flows have become a very influential source of getting the outcomes a nation longs for. Using Foucault's social theory, power and knowledge cannot be analyzed independently. They are interrelated to the extent that people cannot separate them. According to Foucault, knowledge is a source of power, and power is always a function of knowledge. In terms of this, Nye and Keohane (1977) argue that:

Multiple channels connect societies, including informal ties between governmental elites as well as formal foreign office arrangements; informal ties among nongovernmental elites.... and transnational organizations ... The agenda of interstate relationships consists of multiple issues that are not arranged in a clear or consistent hierarchy.... Military security does not consistently dominate the agenda.... The distinction between domestic and foreign issues became blurred.... Military force is not used by the government towards other governments within the region, or on the issues, when complex interdependence prevails... force is often not an appropriate way of achieving other goals (such as economic and ecological welfare) that are becoming more important. (24-29).

Football as Soft Power Projection

Participating in and organizing international sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games enhances nations' global visibility, and it boosts their soft power. In this context, Tunkos and Heere claim that "international sporting events continue to mediate estrangement among people by promoting international understanding and cooperation" (5). Mega sporting events are effective interaction platforms among countries, even those who are in conflictual relations, as they are "used repeatedly to increase communication among hostile countries "(Tunkos and Heere 15). They offer participating countries good platforms to highlight their identity.

Sporting events facilitate unconventional reasons for people to meet, even with leaders. This paves the ground for a smooth outreach to foreign audiences and strengthens ties among countries. Thus, sports can be great sources of hope for political strategy. These events_ Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, and intercontinental competitions_ provide unofficial sites where political leaders and influential figures could meet. This way, sporting events trespass on the boundaries of sport as an end in itself, transforming them into diplomatic encounters, though informally. Such events are 'neutral' grounds where leaders can interact in a way that is different from official settings, for sporting events ultimately have a festive flavor.

The FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games attract leaders from various countries. Their presence is a great opportunity for the host nations to put their soft power on display. This applies to both big and small nations like Qatar at the 2022 FIFA World Cup. They get the chance to “win the hearts and minds” (Cull 1) of foreign audiences, set up strong ties with influential leaders, and boost their international visibility. By this token, international mega sporting events can serve as a ‘diplomatic catalyst’ that facilitates intercultural dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and celebrating difference. Trunkis and Heere believe that:

There are plenty of official meetings and summits for diplomats and heads of state, but few are desirable and entertaining, nor do they receive as much media attention. While enjoying the performances of the elite athletes, including the ones from their own nations, many heads of state often use the opportunity to engage other parties in unofficial discussions about issues. (7)

Another way to show the importance of hosting and participating in international sports events is that they provide concrete insight into countries’ identities. Hosting countries have a great opportunity to project their image worldwide, especially with the advent of Information and Communication Technology and international broadcasting. Many people can watch international sporting events on official and media outlets. Viewers can have a clear idea about a nation’s culture. Broadcasting an event is a tremendous opportunity to display a country’s infrastructure and development to attract foreign investments and enhance its attractiveness. Mega sporting events serve as an effective tool to spread a nation’s ideologies. For instance, when Morocco organized the 2019 African Games in Rabat, the occasion was more than a sports event. It was a clear and explicit act of diplomacy and identity projection. It provided an opportunity to extend Morocco’s return to the African Union as an act of reconsideration of the state’s foreign affairs, showing Morocco’s African ties with the continent. To explain, after years of absence from the African Union, Morocco’s rejoining the Union in 2017 has become a turning point in the country’s foreign policy. This reintegration was strengthened by hosting the African Games in Rabat. This event has had a symbolic meaning by showcasing Morocco’s deeply rooted African origins. This has paved the way for Morocco to instrumentalize its soft power as a leader on the continent. The event has been fruitful on two levels. It allowed Morocco to strengthen its ties with classical ‘friends’ like the Ivory Coast, Gabon, Senegal, etc., and simultaneously, open new horizons with ‘neutral’ nations, and attempt to win the attitudes of rival countries. The African Games became a diplomatic stage where Morocco could successfully project its attractiveness and inclusiveness, which are key characteristics of a country’s soft power. In this context, Morocco implemented sports as a non-political means to enhance its reputation and influence throughout Africa.

The Guardian’s Coverage of Morocco at the 2022 FIFA World Cup

This study selected one of the most popular newspapers worldwide: *The Guardian*. It published about nine articles on Morocco’s performance during the FIFA World Cup that took place from November 20th to December 18th, 2022, in Qatar. The articles were not only about daily football reports, but they also included cultural reflections. This shows the newspaper’s unusual engagement with a non-European team in such a big international event. The choice of *The Guardian* is due to its wide reach. It is one of the most well-known outlets in the English-speaking world. The Guardian’s depiction is an appropriate lens to examine how Morocco’s football success is perceived within a global, mainly Western context.

Table 1: The Guardian’s Articles on Morocco (2022 World Cup)

Article No.	Title	Focus / Angle
1	<i>Football-mad Morocco dreams of a World Cup final in its own arc</i>	Sociocultural passion, national expectations
2	<i>Morocco aim to break new ground for Africa after World Cup heartbreaks</i>	African continental framing
3	<i>Morocco’s meteoric rise at World Cup is helping to smash stereotypes</i>	Anti-stereotype discourse, identity politics
4	<i>‘We’re here and hungry’: Morocco close in on history at home and away</i>	Team psychology, supporters’ narratives
5	<i>World Cup 2022 team guide: Morocco</i>	Pre-tournament evaluation
6	<i>Morocco seeks to be remembered as heroes by eclipsing class of 1986</i>	Historical comparisons, national legacy

Article No.	Title	Focus / Angle
7	<i>Morocco's World Cup odyssey has changed what it means to be the underdog</i>	Re-defining "underdog" identity
8	<i>'Immense joy': Moroccan media hail good faith paying off with Spain shock</i>	Coverage of domestic media reaction
9	<i>Morocco book historic World Cup semi-final place as En-Nesyri stuns Portugal</i>	Match report + geopolitical symbolism

Although all nine articles provide significant insights into The Guardian's discourses on Morocco's performance, this study selects article 9 as a sample for analysis and interpretation. The selection of this article is ascribed to three main principles:

- ✓ Historical significance and visibility
- ✓ Linguistic richness
- ✓ Thematic representativeness

The article describes Morocco's performance as the first Arab and African nation to reach this stage in the competition. This historical significance places the article as documenting and creating a media event. This accomplishment is that the World Cup attracts global audiences and creates debates and discussions worldwide across different channels (social media, diplomatic missions, etc.). Apart from the article's historical significance, it was selected due to its linguistic richness because the journalist uses metaphors that can activate readers' schemata that control how people interpret a given message. While evaluative vocabulary provides a rich ground for analysis. Another major justification for opting for Article 9 is its representativeness of broader themes.

Article 9

Morocco book historic World Cup semi-final place as En-Nesyri stuns Portugal



Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/dec/1>

Before indulging in the linguistic components of the article, a semiotic reading of the article's image is very telling. At the visual level, the image depicts Moroccan football players celebrating their victory. They occupy the center of the photo, dressed in Morocco's national colors- green and red. While at the connotative level, the photo trespasses its journalistic purposes to portray a narrative of national pride, unity, perseverance, and the like. It symbolizes collective strength and national cohesion, which are ingrained in Morocco's historic battles, especially against Portugal. The image can be interpreted as a renaissance of Morocco's memorable victory in the *Wadi Al-Makhazin Battle* ¹in 1578. Putting a group of Moroccan players in the center is a transformation from peripheral visibility to central and global recognition. This signifies a sense of agency and national self-assertion. Within the framework of soft power, this image communicates more than jubilation; rather, it conveys deep messages of collectiveness, confidence, determination, and, more importantly, it overcomes an inferiority complex. The Guardian's photo demonstrates the visual dimensions of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Table 2: Linguistic and Thematic Coding of The Guardian Article and Its Implications for Morocco's Soft Power

The following table provides a detailed visualization of Morocco's representation in The Guardian's article. The latter transforms Morocco's football team's milestone from a sports event into an act of cultural diplomacy and nation branding worldwide.

Category	Extract / Example	Linguistic Feature	Interpretation / Function	Implications for Morocco's Image and Soft Power
1. Metaphor & Imagery	"They are made of granite."	Metaphor (solidity, strength)	Depicts Morocco as resilient and indestructible.	Builds an image of Morocco as a strong, determined nation — symbolizing political and social stability that attracts global respect.
	"The roar tore right through everyone here and way, way beyond."	Auditory metaphor, hyperbole	Highlights the emotional intensity and global impact of the win.	Portrays Morocco as a unifying force whose success resonates globally, boosting its visibility and emotional appeal.
2. Tone & Emotion	"Wow. History is made, and it is made of this."	Exclamatory tone; repetition	Expresses astonishment and admiration.	Reinforces Morocco's image as a country capable of achieving the extraordinary — enhancing prestige and admiration in international public opinion.
3. Agency & Active Verbs	"They held on." / "They continued to create."	Dynamic verb use	Portrays Morocco as an active, strategic agent.	Suggests national competence and self-determination — qualities aligned with leadership and initiative in diplomacy and development.
4. Contrast & Framing	"Portugal fielded Cristiano Ronaldo... to no avail."	Contrastive framing	Emphasizes Morocco's triumph over a global football superpower.	Positions Morocco as capable of competing and succeeding on the world stage, symbolizing equality and global recognition beyond economic size.
5. Temporal Progression	"Then it happened." / "Just before 6 pm in Casablanca."	Temporal sequencing	Builds narrative tension and global connectedness.	Links the event to Moroccan time and place, localizing the global narrative — reinforcing national identity within a universal context.
6. Lexical Choice (Evaluation)	"Exceptional," "historic," "worthy," "delirious."	Positive evaluative adjectives	Glorifies Morocco's performance.	Constructs a positive international discourse that enhances Morocco's moral and cultural prestige — vital dimensions of soft power.

¹ The Battle of Ksar El Kebir, also known as the Battle of the Three Kings or the Battle of Wadi al-Makhazin (30 Jumada al-Awwal 986 AH / August 4, 1578 CE), was a major conflict fought between Morocco and Portugal on August 4, 1578.

7. Inclusivity & Scale	"An entire continent." / "Way, way beyond."	Expansive and inclusive phrasing	Extends Morocco's achievement to Africa.	Frames Morocco as Africa's ambassador, reinforcing its leadership role and continental diplomacy.
8. Cultural Representation	"The myth of Morocco's defensiveness can finally be laid to rest."	Corrective discourse	Counters stereotypes about African football.	Promotes a rebranding of Morocco — from peripheral or defensive to creative, intelligent, and modern — aligning with its cultural diplomacy goals.
9. Symbolism & Collective Identity	"They held on with just 10 men – and an entire continent."	Collective identification, synecdoche	Merges national and continental identity.	Strengthens Morocco's soft power by aligning it with African unity and solidarity, fostering positive sentiment across the continent.
10. Narrative Voice & Perspective	"It's a delirious, historic moment."	Subjective, emotional tone	Creates immediacy and shared excitement.	Humanizes Morocco's global image — making it emotionally relatable and culturally appealing to international audiences.

The Guardian's description of Morocco's accomplishments in Qatar FIFA 2022 World Cup represents sport as an instrument for international relations smoothening, where sporting events become platforms for interaction among states and/ or nations. Such events, hence, function on different levels, namely, nation branding for national reputation, cultural diplomacy for promoting intercultural understanding, and public diplomacy for shaping foreign audiences' opinions. The representation of Morocco in this journalistic article can be described as nation branding in action, where various narratives contribute to a global reputation, especially among publics unfamiliar with Morocco and its culture. A nation's reputation can be 'brushed' and transmitted to the world through consistent representation in international media, particularly nowadays, as news media rely on social media to attract people from all over the world. They have websites, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, etc.

Lexical Choices

The journalist's use of praiseful lexical repertoire, such as "historic, exceptional, worthy, magnificent", shapes readers' attitudes and creates an axiological position that helps Morocco be culturally attractive because consistent positive assessment reinforces an attractive ideological orientation. The use of abstract nouns like "resilience, unity, endurance, pride" can be interpreted as being important qualities and attributes of Moroccan identity, creating a national character beyond borders. The article is pregnant with conceptual metaphors, especially with the use of militaristic jargon like "sport is war, war, conquer, etc". This linguistic choice can position Morocco's development processes as a country able to overcome serious obstacles. Facing Portugal, Spain, and Belgium, which are superpowers in the field, carries symbolic and moral gains. The article can also be interpreted from a post-colonial narrative and the emergence of South assertion internationally. This view challenges orientalist stereotypes about non-Westerners, as readers usually interpret the text (the article) based on their prior knowledge and representations. Western media representations of non-Western nations can be shaped by hegemonic discourses prevailing in the West. The way the article is constructed challenges the existing models readers have about Morocco. This aligns with the idea that marginalized and/ or small nations mobilize various resources to achieve political, economic, and symbolic gains.

Translating athletic achievement into political capital requires serious efforts and planning from various stakeholders. Soft power and cultural diplomacy cannot leave tangible political outcomes alone. They must align with substantial national policies. There should be a strong link between representation and reality. In the case of Morocco, international media representations, such as The Guardian, match ongoing changes at different levels, be they political, economic, or social.

Conclusion: Synthesis

The article's linguistic construction and lexical choices to describe Morocco's performance in the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup demonstrate how sports' triumph can be an effective tool of nation branding and soft power projection beyond borders, particularly in contemporary international relations, which rely on different resources. Thanks to the use of evaluative language, the journalistic narrative can transform sporting events into a symbolic capital that can enhance Morocco's reputation and/ or image, hence, its geopolitical standing. Athletic achievements' representation in global media outlets is not for entertainment only,

but they are significant instances that must be seized by different stakeholders to achieve political outcomes. Depicting Morocco as an African modern nation positions the country as a continental leader and simultaneously attracts Western audiences, especially from the English-speaking world. This will increase Morocco's appeal across various foreign audiences. In this sense, the media serves Morocco's broader economic and political objectives through image enhancement. This study is only the first step in a research project that aims to examine how global media coverage can generate narratives about Morocco. Future studies will include content analyses of international press, such as The New York Times, The Times, Le Monde, L'Opinion, and other significant newspapers. This variety will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sports can enhance the country's reputation to facilitate its foreign policy missions to achieve its desired outcomes.

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