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Sport and Power: hard power, soft power and smart power

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an original and significant contribution to knowledge by rethinking the role of power in sport and leisure studies. Notably, the paper provides much needed theoretical clarity on the concept of 'smart power', and in doing so, then advances the first smart power analysis of sport and leisure. Furthermore, the paper implements a systematic framework for analysing power in sport and leisure, one that locates how hard, soft and smart power, respectively, emerge across five crucial dimensions. By doing so, the paper provides a portable and comprehensive analytical framework for scholars to apply in their future analyses of the power relations inherent within sport and leisure studies.

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Introduction

The concept of soft power refers to the ability 'to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction' (Nye, 2008, p. 94). In relation to sport and leisure studies, arguably few terms have enjoyed the level of application as that of soft power, with academics, policymakers and journalists the world over utilising the concept to either theoretically explain, critically evaluate, or to publicly comment on, political leader's motivations in staging major sports events, along with states' investments in elite sports clubs, leagues and athletes. Soft power's wide-ranging applicability has nonetheless hindered advancement of Joseph Nye's concepts of 'hard power' and 'smart power', respectively. While instances of what may be called 'hard power' - the ability to achieve outcomes via coercion and payment – have been discussed within the sport and leisure studies literatures, particularly in the context of war and conflict, the concept itself has nonetheless yet to be directly applied. Furthermore, the concept of smart power – that is, the combination of hard and soft power strategies – remains non-existent in this regard. One reason for the lack of utilisation of smart power arguably stems from the concept's ongoing theoretical weaknesses: smart power is notoriously 'complicated' and 'complex' (Gallarotti, 2015, p. 253), with Henne (2022, p. 95) classifying it as one of social science's many 'confusing neologisms'.

This paper seeks to make an original and significant contribution to knowledge by rethinking the role of power in sport and leisure studies. Notably, the paper attempts to overcome the theoretical weaknesses of smart power by advancing an understanding of the concept that positions this form of power as the intentional coming together of *security*, *diplomacy* and *development* strategies. Crucially, this clears the way for our main contribution: to advance analysis of sport and leisure beyond the dominant concept of soft power in ways that comprehensively engage hard, soft *and*

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smart power. In what follows we focus on one crucial area of leisure studies: that is, nation-states' organisation of, and investment and participation in, sports mega-events. Such events denote 'first-order events', such as a FIFA World Cup or Summer Olympic Games, as well as 'second-order events', such as the Winter Olympic Games, Rugby World Cup, or Formula 1. Our decision to focus on sport events stems from their growing substantive significance for the exercise of power. These events, therefore, act as ideal and illuminating units of analysis for exploring how hard, soft and smart power manifest and intersect.

Throughout or forthcoming analysis, we systematically implement a five-dimensional framework for examining hard, soft and smart power, respectively. The dimensions of this framework include: three dimensions on the *international contexts* through which sport leads to hard, soft and smart power outcomes, including the use of sport events by international governmental organisations, global sporting governing bodies and nation-states themselves; one dimension with regard to the *domestic contexts* within which power emerges through sport events; and one dimension on the *inherent risks* involved in using sport events for the exercise of power. Our decision to include three dimensions on international contexts stems from the way hard, soft and smart power have almost exclusively been treated outside of sport and leisure. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of work in this regard has followed Nye in focusing on the exercise of power in international and foreign policy settings. Whilst we therefore acknowledge the importance of the international context, we also recognise that such a focus has led to certain blind spots within the literature, and subsequent critique by international relations scholars who have argued that more effort is needed to also uncover the domestic settings within which Nye's power forms emerge (see: Edney, 2015; Lee, 2009), along with the risks involved in any pursuit of power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). Consequently, we therefore argue that, to achieve a rigorous and holistic account of the ways through which sport and sports events are used for hard, soft and smart power, any analysis needs to crucially uncover how these power forms emerge in international *and* domestic contexts, as well as to locate the risks involved in the exercise of these power forms. Following our five-dimensional examination of hard, soft and smart power in sport, we then conclude by detailing the paper's theoretical and practical implications, as well as identify avenues for future research.

Sport and hard power

Nye adopts what can be classified as a 'strategic' approach to power. In doing so, Nye follows the assertation made by Lukes (2005, p. 478), that while successful power outcomes are what actors ultimately seek, the materialisation of such outcomes should only ever be viewed as a 'potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualised'. Doing so leads to a treatment of power as a mere capacity – that is, as the capacity of an actor 'to make or to receive any change, or to resist it' (ibid: 478). It is because of this that, for Nye (2014, p. 121), the most important facet of the power process is what he terms 'contextual intelligence', denoting the 'intuitive diagnostic skill that helps a leader understand change, interpret the outside world, set objectives, and align strategies and tactics with objectives'. This is because, to have the greatest capacity to cause or resist power effects, leaders must be effective at discerning complex trends, develop appropriate policies relative to their power capabilities, and, importantly, identify when and how to deploy certain power strategies. Consequently, contextually intelligent leaders are those who make use of the full range of 'power options' at their disposal to devise and implement strategies that are tailored and responsive to corresponding and, at times, rapidly changing, contexts and scenarios (Nye, 2008).

As one power option, Nye (2011, p. 16) argues that certain scenarios call for the utilisation of 'hard power', denoting 'the ability to get desired outcomes through coercion and payment'. In conventional hard power terms, leaders may, for instance, seek to get what they want through the deployment of their military assets, which can be used to forcefully engage, weaken and/or destroy others. National leaders can also get what they want in hard power terms through monetary (dis)

incentives: when, for instance, incentivising others with access to favourable cross-border tariff reductions, financial aid, or investing in overseas markets; and via disincentives, in the form of sanctions, financial embargoes, or the suspension of aid. In all such cases, leaders seek to get what they want by drawing on their hard, material power resources.

Across the existing sport and leisure studies literatures, Nye's concept of hard power has yet to be directly applied. Therefore, in this section we seek to be the first to advance a hard power analysis of sport and sports mega-events. In doing so, we implement our five-dimensional framework for examining power. The first international hard power dimension of which centres on the use of sport for high-level global policy. Indicative here is how major sports events are used by state collectives as a form of coercive diplomacy against those deemed not to comply with established rules and norms. Crucial here are sanctions and boycotts, which are intended to act as forms of material and/or symbolic punishment, with the goal being to forcibly change the behaviour of the intended target. We may point here to the infamous Olympic Games boycotts during the height of the Cold War, first by Western Allies in their boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, and then, in response, the boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games by the USSR and its satellite states (Pasko, 2021). Furthermore, is the way states are forcefully removed from athletic competition when they fail to align with acceptable forms of conduct: South Africa's expulsion from FIFA and the IOC in 1964 and 1970 respectively in protest over the country's upholding of Apartheid, is one such example (Merrett, 2005); as is Russia's banning from international sporting competition in response to evidence of 'state-sponsored' doping practices, and then in response to the state's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (*The Guardian*, 9 December 2019; Lindholm, 2022). An additional example of high-level global policy is the way sports events are used by intergovernmental organisations to achieve their aims: note the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, and its 'Sport and Security Programme', which, in collaboration with national governments, and various global security experts, sets out to disseminate models of best practice in the securitisation strategies of major sports events and their host nations (United Nations, n.d.).

Our second international hard power dimension in this regard centres on how sport events become linked to moments of *military (de-)escalation*. Key here would be the way sports events have historically been used to showcase a nation's military and technological sophistication. Such an occurrence took place when North Korea decided to stage a national military parade the day before South Korea's hosting of the 2018 Winter Olympics, as part of the North's strategic attempt to utilise the spotlight surrounding the tournament to display its 'world-class military power' (*BBC*, 8 February 2018a). Additionally, is when tensions at sports events spill over into instances of military conflict. The infamous 'soccer war' being one such moment, referring to the 1970 World Cup qualifier between El Salvador and Honduras, where the former's victory over the latter added to wider tensions, culminating 10 days later in El Salvador's decision to invade Honduras, resulting in military skirmishes that lasted a total of four days, killing an estimated 3,000 people (Bertoli, 2017). Furthermore, we may note how sports events have also been used to cool potential military escalations between currently opposing forces (Hough, 2008): such as during the 1998 World Cup match between Iran and the U.S., where the Iranian players decided to gift the U.S. national team flowers as a symbol of peace and 'to portray a unified message' during a time of significant hostility between the two countries (*The Guardian*, 29 November 2022).

A third international hard power dimension relates to when sports events are used to strengthen *economic relations abroad*. For national leaders, a crucial objective is the use of one's staging of a sports event to exercise greater influence in key financial markets. Take, for example, Qatar's staging of the 2022 World Cup, which sought to play a vital role in increasing the small state's share of the global tourism industry, and to compete in this regard with regional neighbours Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). Then there was the UK's staging of the London 2012 Olympics, and its organisation of the British Business Embassy, a high-profile series of summits and conferences that coincided with the Games to bring together business leaders, policymakers and

investors from across the UK to engage in strategic discussions with overseas financiers, resulting in an estimated £5.9 billion worth of new contracts for UK firms (*Financial Times*, 21 July 2013). Additionally, we may locate how sports events are used by numerous global brands to strengthen their positions in specific international markets (Krzyzaniak, 2018). We may point here to the range of state-owned Gulf flag-carriers such as Qatar Airways, Fly Emirates and Etihad Airways, which have used their sponsorship of sports events to secure their positions as some of the world's most profitable airlines (*Qatar Airways*, 2023).

To further advance analyses, crucial here is the need to also identify the domestic dimension of hard power acquisition through sport. One way this occurs is when those in charge use sports events to award and *enhance ties with powerful groups within society*. In most cases, the organisation of sports events are used by national leaders at catalysts for urban development, leading to the gentrification of the cities that stage them: this is something that occurred during South Africa's staging of the 2010 World Cup, whereby infrastructure development projects for the tournament only further intensified the marginalisation and displacement of already disadvantaged groups in cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg (Steinbrink et al., 2011); the same was true for Rio de Janeiro's staging of the 2016 Olympic Games, with an estimated 70,000 residents displaced, predominantly from low-income neighbourhoods and favelas (*The Washington Post*, 29 July 2021; see also: Gaffney, 2016). A further mode through which hard power is strengthened in domestic terms is when the organisation of major events are used to strategically *advance the militarization of national societies*. A key trend in recent decades has been the added importance attached to the 'security legacy' that accompanies sports events, with event organisers using their hosting of the event as justification for the need to build new surveillance technologies, increase funding for the development of national security forces, and/or to test new or existing crowd management systems (Graham, 2012; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). Note, for instance, Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, whereby authorities spent over $6.5 billion on upgrades to the security infrastructure of its capital city (*New York Times*, 4 August 2008; Yu et al., 2009). Whilst these security upgrades are a requirement to stage the event itself, they nonetheless remain in place long after the tournament finishes, resulting in improved population monitoring and social control powers for the host government.

Finally, so too is there always a risk dimension to any attempt at hard power. In the case of sport, notable in this regard is the way states can, at times, *over stretch their attempts to acquire sports events*. We can point here to the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups, which were shrouded in accusations of corruption, with claims that Russian and Qatari officials had deliberately bribed FIFA Executive Committee members to secure favourable votes (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). This, in turn, led to several calls for a re-vote, along with an investigation into the bidding process by the United States Department for Justice, after the U.S. had failed in its bid for the 2022 World Cup (see: *New York Times*, 6 April 2020). Furthermore, is when political leaders' attempts to secure sports mega-events are perceived by others in negative terms, leading to *various hard power reactions*. On the regional front, one example would be the 2017 air and sea blockade of Qatar by the neighbouring states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, in response to objections over Qatar's growing foreign policy ambitions across the region, part of which included the state's acquisition of the 2022 World Cup (Ulrichsen, 2023). While, in domestic terms, are those instances when populations publicly demonstrate their disapproval over the financial cost of staging sports events: such as when citizens demonstrate their opposition to their state's intention to bid for a sports event, leading to pressure on leader's to withdraw from the bidding process, as was the case with Boston's bid for the 2024 Olympic Games (*BBC*, 2015b); or in the case of Brazil's staging of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games, which resulted in public riots by thousands of citizens over the rising national cost of hosting these two events, along with the government's general mismanagement of public spending (Butler & Aicher, 2015).

Sport and soft power

While certain contexts call for the coercive utilisation of hard power, other scenarios are more suitable to the deployment of soft power, and the ability 'to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction' (Nye, 2008, p. 94). The very constitution of 'attraction' is, of course, highly subjective, and thus for soft power to materialise, a shared understanding of attraction is required between the power sender and receiver. Soft power therefore rests on the contextual intelligence of political leaders and policymakers to firstly identify what attracts certain target audiences, and then match such forms of attraction to soft power resources, such as their 'appealing' culture, 'innovative' and 'forward-thinking' ideas and/or 'credible' and 'commendable' institutions, values and policies (Nye, 2011). The constitution of attraction between power sender and receiver is also dependent on context: in the context of those seeking a suitable holiday destination, policymakers and tourist planners may attract audiences with their novel tourist amenities or renowned heritage sites, while for those seeking new employment opportunities abroad, a state's level of social advancement, education and standards of living might be more contextually important. Soft power may also be gained via the success of a country's cultural influence abroad – the United States, for instance, has become synonymous with the global reach of its media networks, food and beverage brands, and exportation of film and music. In cases such as these, states seek to get what they want not through coercion, but via their ability to influence the preferences of others.

Having advanced a hard power analysis of sport and sports events, in this section we focus on Nye's concept of soft power. Unlike hard and smart power, soft power has been widely applied to the study of sports mega-events, with academics the world over utilising the concept in their attempt to explain the motivations underpinning leader's desire to invest in, organise, and stage these events. Whilst a full review of the work on soft power and sport is beyond the scope of this paper, notable works include the use of the concept to explain the organisation and hosting of: Germany's 2006 FIFA World Cup (Grix, 2012; Grix & Houlihan, 2014); the 2008 Olympic Games in China (Giulianotti, 2015); the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil (Almeida et al., 2014; Rocha, 2017); the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia (Wolfe, 2020); and the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016). Furthermore, are those works that advance understandings of soft power and sport in more general terms (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2023; Freeman, 2012; Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Nygård & Gates, 2013; Jarvie, 2021).

In mapping out the ways in which sports events and soft power intertwine, we return to our five-dimensional framework for examining power. The first international soft power dimension of which relates to the use of sport by various *global governmental organizations*. Notable here is the way such organisations draw on sport to raise awareness of their various global ambitions and objectives. One such organisation is the United Nations, which uses sport to enhance international values of gender equality, peace and inclusivity, whilst so too seeking to empower young people, and to increase recognition of the importance of sustainability and climate change (Giulianotti, 2011; Spence et al., 2024). In doing so, these organisations seek to draw on the popularity of sports events to re-affirm their causes. Note, for example, how the United Nations championed the fact that the 2024 Olympics would be the first ever 'gender equal Olympics', with 50% of the athletes competing at the Games being female, and how this, in turn, acted as an occasion to highlight the work of the UN Women initiative around the world, which partners 'with local organizations to help end violence against women and girls through the power of sport' (United Nations, 2024).

Our second international soft power dimension centres on how sports events are used by leaders to increase *diplomatic relations amongst nations*. Note, for example, how staging sports events are used by their hosts as occasions to celebrate notions of unity and alliance amongst regional neighbours: take South Africa's staging of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, which sought to act as an instrument of solidarity between the country and the African continent (see: Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011); and, more recently, is the 2026 FIFA World Cup, to be jointly staged by the United States, Canada and Mexico as a demonstration of how all three countries are 'united through sport' (*BBC*,

2018b). Then there is the way such events are used to forge new diplomatic agreements between political leaders (Dichter, 2021). As one example, take the Sport for Sustainability Summit, organised jointly by France's President Macron and the IOC, and staged on the eve of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. The Summit welcomed over 500 participants, including heads of state, policymakers and leaders of international organisations, resulting in the signing of several 'ambitious and measurable political, financial and sporting commitments' (IOC, 25 July 2024).

As a third international soft power dimension, is the way these events are used by their hosts to *showcase the nation on the international stage*. This is achieved through drawing on the significant public interest that accompany these events, with television viewer figures usually in the millions, and major events such as a FIFA World Cup or Summer Olympic Games attracting global audiences in their billions. One way soft power can be gained in this regard is by using these events to educate others on the values of one's peoples. A notable example would be Germany's staging of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, whereby organisers sought to use the event to change people's perceptions of Germany and the German people, and to break down any pre-existing negative stereotypes (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Furthermore, is the way 'success' at sporting events can generate the soft power qualities of praise and admiration. This might be through the capacity to produce an effective athletic labour force capable of achieving a high level of sporting success, evidenced through the accomplishments of one's national sports teams: such as the success of Brazil at the FIFA World Cups, Kenya and Olympic athletics, or South Africa at the Rugby World Cup. Additionally, is the way soft power can be gained via the ability to successfully stage the event itself: hosting a sports mega-event has become synonymous with the strength of a multitude of states and their leaders, and the capability to effectively overcome the complexities and challenges of hosting such a massive global spectacle can generate applause from others through demonstrating a nation's organisational and logistical competence.

While there is a large body of work on soft power, there is however a distinct lack of recognition when it comes to pinpointing the domestic dimension of soft power acquisition through sport. To overcome this, crucial here is the identification of the way sports events are be used to *enhance the soft power of political leaders themselves*, and in doing so, help foster national pride and an associated 'feel-good' factor amongst national citizens. The London 2012 Olympics is one example that saw a nation bound by the success of their athletes with the result that the beleaguered incumbent Government at the time were granted a period of grace that lasted for months after the event. Then there is Paris' staging of the 2024 Olympic Games, described by President Macron as 'a formidable moment of French pride' as part of an attempt to bring back optimism and morale amongst citizens after an abysmal approval rating during his second term, and ultimately 'to show that, with him, the country is doing well' (*Foreign Policy*, 11 July 2024). Or we may point to the 2023 awarding of the 2028 European Championships to the co-hosts of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and how then-UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak positioned the tournament as an event that would symbolically strengthen the unity of the four 'Home Nations' following rises in pro-independence rhetoric and support (*The Independent*, 10 October 2023).

Finally, we argue that any sound analysis of power in sport and leisure also needs to crucially identify the risk dimension involved in any pursuit of soft power. In the context of sports events, whilst such events can be used to positively promote a state on the world stage, so too can they lead to damages to a state's image, when, for instance, the event is used by non-governmental organisations or other relevant actors to *highlight a host's social, political and/or organizational shortcomings*. Elsewhere, the risks attached to any pursuit of soft power has been termed 'soft disempowerment' to denote the 'actions, inactions and/or policies of states that ultimately upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness' (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1152). As one example, we can locate how soft disempowerment unfolded leading up to, and during, Qatar's staging of the 2022 World Cup, when organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – along with key international news networks – used the publicity of the

event to highlight and critique the poor treatment of expatriate workers in Qatar, with claims that World Cup workers themselves were victims of a plethora of human rights abuses (*Amnesty International*, 27 January 2020). Furthermore, we may point to Tokyo's staging of the 2020 Olympic Games, which went ahead in the summer of 2021, despite calls for the organisers to postpone the Games due to increased public health concerns on the back of rising COVID-19 cases across Japan (*BBC*, 15 May 2021). Of course, just as the materialisation of soft power depends on a shared understanding of 'attraction' between power sender and receiver, so too does soft disempowerment rest on the perceptions certain audiences occupy on the constitution of 'unattractive' policies, actions and outcomes (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Sport and smart power

When developing their power strategies, Nye argues leaders should seek to create 'smart power' policies that effectively combine hard and soft power. This is because, Nye (2009) argues, hard and soft power are not enough on their own: leaders cannot always get what they want solely via hard power – investing great sums of money into the construction of tourism attractions is only beneficial if foreign audiences find your culture and amenities appealing in the first place; similarly, soft power on its own cannot solve all problems – even though North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un is a fan of the U.S's National Basketball League (NBA), this alone is unlikely to deter his ongoing nuclear weapons program, which is considered to be a threat to U.S. national security (ibid.). Furthermore, the closer integration of hard and soft strategies not only make national leaders more informed but also provides them with a greater level of flexibility to respond to developing situations quickly and in multiple ways.

Unlike soft power, the concept of smart power has yet to be applied to the study of sport and sports events, and thus in this section we seek to be the first to advance such an analysis. One reason for this lack of analysis stems from the conceptual weaknesses of smart power, making theoretical advancement and practical application challenging. To overcome this, here we advance an innovative understanding of smart power. First, we argue that smart power should not be seen as a power form in its own right, as viewing it as such only adds to the existing confusion inherent within smart power. Rather, smart power should be seen as a state-led *power strategy*. That is to say that smart power does not work in the same way as soft or hard power. If we define power as the capacity to get what one wants, then we can see how hard and soft power occupy the potential to lead to direct behaviour change: if deployed correctly, a hard power resource, such as a land army, can be used to directly change the behaviour of others in a coercive way; similarly, a soft power resource such as a state's culture, if appealing in the minds of audiences, can be used to directly change behaviour through attraction. Smart power lacks this direct impact on behaviour change, instead relying on the behavioural changes brought about by the effective combination of soft and hard power attempts. Consequently, while soft and hard power can exist on their own, smart power cannot, as its very existence depends on the prerequisite presence of soft and hard power.

Second, smart power should be seen as an institutional-led, strategic political agenda, one which meaningfully and intentionally combines hard and soft power (Nye, 2011). An example of this in action is the United Kingdom's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (2015, pp. 5–9), which looks to deliver a meaningful, 'full spectrum' power approach, underpinned by the desire to: strengthen 'armed forces' and 'security and intelligence agencies'; 'build stronger relationships with growing powers'; and further enhance the UK's 'position as the world's leading soft power'. Then there is the United States' National Security Strategy United States National Security Strategy (2010, p. 5), which intentionally sets out to 'balance and integrate all elements of American power' in order to maintain its 'military's conventional superiority', while, at the same time, modernise and integrate the country's 'diplomacy and development capabilities' abroad. We argue that smart power is, therefore, the much stronger and deliberate integration of *security*, *diplomacy* and *development* policies.

Finally, smart power is not just the combination of hard and soft power. Rather, it is the *mutually beneficial* integration of hard and soft power functions. Smart power does not materialise through the fragmented implementation of security, diplomacy and development policies, but does so rather via smart strategies that are designed to *mutually support* and *advance* one's security, diplomacy and development objectives (Nye, 2009). It is because of this that we argue that sports mega-events can occupy dual roles: indeed, as we demonstrated in the previous section, these events can be used as vehicles for the production of soft power, such as when they lead to various stand-alone diplomatic functions; however, these same diplomatic functions can simultaneously lead to the production of smart power when they mutually support the advancement of security and development functions elsewhere.

In what follows, we return to our five-dimensional framework to advance understandings of how smart power is deployed through states engagement with sports events. The first international smart power dimension of which centres on the role played by sport in *addressing and confronting globally shared concerns*. Notable here is the way a smart power approach is implemented during moments when responding to perceived acts of immorality and/or unjust aggression. A noteworthy example here would be the IOC's response to the Taliban's treatment of women and girls within Afghanistan. In 2021, U.S. and NATO-allied forces withdrew from Afghanistan, leaving the country to return to Taliban control. Since ceasing control of the country, under Taliban rule, restrictions were imposed which prevented women and girls from practicing sport, in turn forcing the IOC 'to take immediate action at the highest level to reverse such restrictions and ensure safe access to sport for women and young girls in the country' (*IOC*, 6 December 2022). On security, the IOC threatened to prohibit Afghanistan's participation at the 2024 Olympic Games, and in doing so, added to ongoing questions on whether the Taliban government should be legitimately 'recognized by members of the international community' (*United Nations*, 21 June 2023). On diplomacy, the IOC showed its support for female athletes from Afghanistan by allowing exiled Afghani athletes to compete at the 2024 Olympics under the flag and anthem of the former, Western-backed Republic (*BBC*, 9 July 2024). And on development, the IOC assembled a humanitarian aid package of USD $560,000, which was donated 'directly to the members of the Olympic community in Afghanistan', with a priority given to the development of women's sport (*IOC*, 8 December 2021).

A further example here is the international response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, whereby countries from around the world rolled out a coordinated smart power approach. On security, note Russia's expulsion from international sporting events (see also: Lindholm, 2022): in February 2022 football's world and European governing bodies, FIFA and UEFA, both suspended Russia from all competitions. In doing so, St Petersburg, one of Russia's largest cities, lost the right to stage the 2022 UEFA Champions League final, along with the associated economic benefit that would have accompanied the event (*UEFA*, 25 February 2022). On diplomacy, sport has also been used as a form of diplomatic support: when, for example, during the EURO 2024 Qualifier match between England and Ukraine in March of 2023, where before kick-off players from both countries posed for a photograph with the Ukrainian flag that included on it the word 'peace' (*CNN*, 26 March 2023). And on development, we can point to the number of countries who have actively provided fleeing Ukrainian athletes with humanitarian and training support: the small state of Switzerland, for example, facilitated the arrival of the 27 Ukrainian professional cyclists, along with 23 ice hockey players, all of whom received access to Swiss training facilities; while Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey likewise provided Ukrainian canoers with accommodation and shelter (*Sportanddev.org*, 21 April 2022).

Our second international smart power dimension centres on the use of sport to *break into new overseas markets*. By this, we refer to those moments when state leaders actively seek to increase their state's economic, political and/or cultural influence in specific regions of the world. Take the small state of Qatar, for example, and its use of sport as part of an effort to break into key European markets. In terms of security, note Qatar's strong representation on leading European sport event governing bodies – the Qatari Nasser Al-Khelaifi, for instance, is an Executive Committee member

of UEFA, and the Chairman of the European Club Association. For a small state in a region of the world that has witnessed regular moments of civil and political unrest, representation with leading European sporting bodies helps Qatar extend its list of influential actors and associations who hold a vested interest in its survival (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). On diplomacy, the state's staging of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, two editions of the FIFA Club world Cup, and a host of smaller European events – such as the Italian Super Cup or professional golf's European Tour – seek in-part to make the state relevant to European audiences. And on development, note Visit Qatar's and Qatar Airways sponsorship of the 2024 European Championships, which not only part funds this event, but in turn actively seeks to connect Qatar to key European tourism markets, thus helping towards the state's long-term economic diversification objectives (*Qatar Airways*, 2024).

A further example here would be the way China has used sport to break into new markets through its Belt and Road Initiative (henceforth 'BRI'), a state-led, U.S.$1 trillion project that seeks to link China to the world through the loaning of funds for the construction of physical infrastructure overseas (*Council on Foreign Affairs*, 2 February 2023). On development, China has funded the construction of several sport event stadiums, largely through donations, as part of an attempt at what has been termed as 'stadium diplomacy' (Dubinsky, 2021). Reminiscent of a wider trend across Africa, for the 2023 African Cup of Nations, hosted by the Ivory Coast, China funded the construction or renovation of 50% of the stadiums used for the tournament, including the building of the 60,000-seater Alassane Ouattara Stadium, the venue that staged the final. For China, the development of such stadia is a small price to pay, particularly as the country has, in recent years, emerged as the Ivory Coast's largest trading partner (*The New York Times*, 10 February 2024). Another African country that China has invested in is the small state of Djibouti. Since the early-1990s, China has not only gone on to secure Djibouti as a BRI member, but so too has it funded the construction of multiple housing projects, hospitals and convention centres, as well as Djibouti's national sports stadium (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). The funding of such projects has helped to support negotiations in one of China's most notable security moves in recent years: the 2017 opening of the People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, China's first and only overseas military base. This move can be seen as a sign of China's growing presence in Africa, with the state seeking to use the base to increase its 'military co-operation' exercises across the region (*BBC*, 12 July 2017). This move has been seen by some as the start of China's desire for the construction of a global network of overseas military bases, one that may eventually match the United States, which currently has more than 750 bases across the world, one of which is also located in the African state of Djibouti (ibid. 7 October 2024). Finally, on diplomacy, has been the introduction of the six-day 'Summit Forum on Belt and Road Communication of Sports Civilization and Cultural Exchange', which was held in 2019 in China's Shanxi province. The forum brought together sports policy-makers, historians, archaeologists and cultural sector experts from multiple BRI countries to celebrate the shared development of various sports – including Olympic sports – and ultimately to 'use sport to promote cultural exchanges between China and other countries' (*The Diplomat*, 24 December 2019).

A third international smart power dimension is when the staging of sport events are used to *gain or restore regional hegemony*. Note, for example, Qatar's staging of the 2022 World Cup, which was not only sought for its ability to showcase the state's rate of development, but so too to emerge from the foreign policy and diplomatic shadow of its much larger neighbour, Saudi Arabia, whilst also to shore up its national security by raising awareness of its existence and, as one of the smallest states in Asia, its right to foreign policy independence (Brannagan, 2017). Furthermore, we may point here to the case of the small island of Fiji, which has used its relative success in international Rugby Union events to gain international recognition and strengthen links to key global and regional institutions (diplomacy), to boost its share of Pacific tourism (development), and to support the legitimacy of the national ruling government (security) (Connell, 2018). Furthermore here is the role of sports mega-events in East Asia: the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, for example, were used by Japanese authorities to help the country's population open up further to foreign ideas, values and

norms (diplomacy), to showcase Japan as a popular tourism destination abroad (development), and so too to compete for regional power and legitimacy (security) with rivals South Korea and China, both of whom have staged their own sports mega-events in recent years, with the former hosting the 2018 Winter Olympics, and the later the 2022 Winter Games (Jeong & Grix, 2023).

Then there is the domestic dimension to smart power acquisition through sport. Key here is the way sport is used during times of national transition – that is, during moments when leaders seek to break from the existing order via the introduction of new national visions and policies. Such transitions largely occur when new leaders come into power, either via constitutionally democratic elections, forcible regime change, or inheritance, in many cases leading to an overhaul of national priorities. Note, for example, Saudi Arabia's heightened desire to stage multiple sports events – including the 2034 FIFA World Cup – and how this has coincided with the rise in power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who, in 2022, replaced his father, Salman bin Abdulaziz, as the Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia (*BBC*, 28 September 2022). For Saudi Arabia, the staging of such events not only seek to improve the popularity of the Crown Prince amongst the country's nationals by introducing new avenues of entertainment (diplomacy), but so too to develop the sports industry in Saudi Arabia in order to help the country diversify its national economy away from a reliance on hydrocarbon resources (security), as well as to inspire Saudi's large population of young people to take up sport and physical activity, and in doing so, to instil healthy lifestyles amongst a citizenry that suffers from a high prevalence of diabetes and obesity (development) (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025; Ettinger, 2023).

Finally, is the risk dimension inherent in any smart power pursuit. In the case of sport events, notable here is when the staging of these events leads to simultaneous hard and soft power losses. One such example is when the infrastructure used for the staging of a sport event turns into a 'white elephant' – that is, infrastructure that fails to be used post-event and ultimately falls into to a state of disrepair, simultaneously leading to an economic burden for the host, and negative scrutiny of event organisers. Take, for example, Brazil's staging of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, whereby in the 12 months following the event, several of the stadiums built for the tournament remained unused, leading to local governments struggling to meet financial running costs (security), public debate across the country on the social 'value of the physical infrastructure left behind by the World Cup' (development), and criticism by international groups on the negative impact dilapidated stadiums where having on the surrounding environment (diplomacy) (*BBC*, 29 March 2015a; *Scientific American*, 19 June; 2014). Furthermore, we may point to those moments when poor athletic performances at sports events simultaneously lead to moments of national embarrassment (diplomacy), a non-return on investment (development), and a negative impact on the fate of certain sports (security): note, for example, Team GB's dismal performance in basketball at the London 2012 Olympics, which came at a cost of £8.6 million spent to fund the team, and led to the subsequent decision to completely withdraw funding for the sport in the run up to the 2016 Olympic Games (*The Guardian*, 18 December 2012); or we may point to Brazil's humiliating on-field performance at the country's staging of the 2014 World Cup, adding to public debate on the value of hosting the event, and leading to nation-wide anger and dejection over the manner in which the national team existed the tournament (*The Guardian*, 9 July 2014).

Conclusion

The paper set out to rethink the role of power in sport and leisure studies. In doing so, we have made an original and significant contribution to knowledge in two crucial respects. First, we have responded to a knowledge gap in the literature by advancing what we believe to be an innovative understanding of the concept of smart power. Second, this has, in turn, cleared the way for us to then implement a systematic framework for examining hard, soft, and smart power in sport. This has added to existing literature in two notable ways. First, through the introduction of our five-dimensional framework, we have argued for the need to identify the international *and* domestic

dimensions of hard, soft and smart power in sport, and so too the inherent risks involved in using sport and sports events for the exercise of these power forms. We hope this has provided a more holistic and rigorous account of power, one that advances analyses of hard, soft and smart power in sport by moving beyond the dominant focus on international power contexts. Second, we have been the first to advance a smart power analysis of sport, and in doing so, we have sought to provide greater clarity on the concept of smart power itself. In doing so, we have advanced theoretical understandings of power in sport by progressing beyond the influential concept of soft power, to be the first to show how sport and sport events can be used for hard, soft *and* smart power outcomes.

We envisage that the theoretical contribution we have made here will be of interest to those scholars studying power relations in sport and leisure, be that from an international relations, political science, international political sociology and/or sports governance perspective, along with those engaged in the political sociology of nation-states. Future academic work may seek to build on our analysis here in two notable respects. First, we argue for a step-change in future analyses, one that develops a better appreciation of the multiplicity involved in power in sport. At present, the literature is dominated by research that focuses on the international dimensions of state's soft power attempts through sport. Moving forward, research of this nature should seek to better understand how sport events are also used for domestic soft power functions, linked to leaders' desire to extend their own soft power amongst national populations. Identifying the risks involved here is also key. One fruitful avenue in this regard would be a better understanding of how sports events lead to more domestic forms of soft disempowerment for leaders and their national populations, as this is, to date, an area largely unexplored. Second, our contribution here should also encourage scholars to start to engage in more critical, detailed case studies of smart power in sport. While we have been the first to show how states use sports events for the pursuit of smart power, future research could look to build on this by moving beyond the dominant soft power analyses of authoritarian states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to develop a more holistic analysis of how these states seek to use their forthcoming staging of sports events for broader international objectives linked to security, diplomacy *and* development.

For those non-academic, external audiences, we believe our analysis will be of significant interest to several groups. First, are international sport policy decision-makers and officials, such as those working for major international governmental organisations and sports governing bodies, who are charged with engaging with sport and sports events in significant ways. While sports events have been widely viewed as engines of sport power and diplomacy, and so too used by their hosts for security and national development objectives, such organisations should seek to better understand how these events can also lead to numerous international security and development outcomes outside of the host country. For organisations such as FIFA and the IOC, this would only raise the social and political utility, and thus the marketability, of their events. Second, would be national sports federations and future host cities and states. Crucial here will be for state planners to view their staging of these events in truly holistic terms, and to recognise how sports events have the potential to lead to a multitude of power outcomes. Our paper therefore has highlighted the greater need for state planners to strategically design smart power sport event policies. In doing so, when organising and staging sports events, state officials in particular should first identify their key national security, diplomacy *and* development challenges, and then seek to include the full range of their hard and soft power resources into a highly coordinated grand smart power approach. Therefore, for this hosts, sports events can and should be made to work harder in the achievement of national power objectives. Finally, would be the range of non-governmental organisations and campaign groups, who seek to understand, and respond to and engage with, contemporary developments in the wider politics of sport event awarding, organisation and delivery.

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