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# A critical review on sport and the Arabian Peninsula – the current state of play and future directions

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## ABSTRACT

This article critically reviews the main themes and research agendas that have been explored to study the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula. It identifies four key research trends in which sport and the Arabian Peninsula intersect: (a) soft power and the Arabian Peninsula, (b) nation branding or 'sportswashing', (c) broader case studies and impacts, and (d) the relationship between the global and local. This review is timely considering relevant contemporary events taking place both within and outside of the Arabian Peninsula in relation to sport. For example, the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United FC by a consortium consisting of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, the new LIV Golf Super League also funded through the PIF of Saudi Arabia, and the 2022 men's World Cup in Qatar to name a few. These developments could represent a significant turning point in challenging our political and sociological understanding of sporting investment and mega-events. This article highlights the key trends and theoretical perspectives within the literature, as well as the lacunae such as the notable absence of scholarship on the global, regional and local dynamics of sport beyond the World Cup and Qatar in particular. Moreover, there has been a tendency to focus on top-down processes such as nation branding and soft power rather than a more nuanced approach at examining power at a micro/meso level through, for example, intergroup encounters. Therefore, this review establishes directions for future research in the context of sport and the Arabian Peninsula.

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## Introduction

A last-minute wonder goal by Allan Saint-Maximin rescued a point for Newcastle United at Wolverhampton Wanderers in English football's Premier League in late August 2022. Despite these last-minute heroics, the game was arguably more memorable for the kit adorned by the away team – for the first time in the club's history Newcastle United wore a combination of white and green. The team's third kit drew comparisons with the home kit of the Saudi Arabian national football team and resembled the national colours of the Saudi national flag. Since a Saudi-led consortium supported financially by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) acquired a majority stake in Newcastle United (in October 2021), questions have rightly been asked over the proximity and influence of the state over club affairs. For critical commentators on sport (including academics, activists and journalists) and International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) such as Amnesty International, the team's kit colours indicate the intimate relationship between Newcastle United and Saudi Arabia. It is

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regarded as a manifestation of the power of the Saudi state to use sport for a variety of means, most notably as a vehicle to obfuscate human rights concerns within the Kingdom.

This relationship between Newcastle United and Saudi Arabia is indicative of wider processes occurring in the Arabian Peninsula where sport is becoming a powerful political, economic and socio-cultural tool for development: especially in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain; and to a lesser extent Oman and Kuwait (Chadwick 2019, Reiche and Brannagan 2022). Some of these states are using sport to engage with the international community, and are connecting with the centre of the World System as proposed by Wallerstein (1974, 1979) in new, compelling ways as the above example illustrates. For this reason, this article critically reviews the existing literature, identifying the main themes and research agendas that have characterised scholarship on the relationship between the socio-political and cultural significance of sport and the Arabian Peninsula. The four key research trends identified are: (a) soft power and the Arabian Peninsula, (b) nation branding or 'sports-washing', (c) broader case studies and impacts, and (d) the relationship between the global and local.

The idea of using sport as a tool to achieve socio-political and economic objectives in the Arabian Peninsula is not new: individual countries from the region have adopted and invested in modern codified sport since gaining independence as sovereign states in the 1970s (Thani and Heenan 2017). In the former state of North Yemen, for example, sports clubs were used to promote political integration between the local populations across the different regions of the country (Stevenson 1989). The wealth accrued from oil revenues permitted several of the newly formed Arabian states to signal their sporting prowess by luring internationally renowned football managers to manage their national teams – most notably the UAE's appointment of the then England manager Don Revie in 1977 (Campbell 2011, Thani and Heenan 2017, Lysa 2020). Further, in 1983, Bahrain's state-owned airline Gulf Air became the first shirt sponsor for Chelsea FC. However, since 2005 the scope and breadth of Arabian states' sporting investments have accelerated significantly (Amara 2005, 2008, Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, Chadwick 2019, Rookwood 2019).

Thus, this critical review is timely considering the events taking place *within* and *outside* of the Arabian Peninsula in relation to sport. In 2022 alone, Arabian states played host to several international sporting spectacles. Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup, becoming the first non-secular, Islamic society to do so. Qatar, alongside Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, hosted Formula 1 Grands Prix. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) enthralled fans in Saudi Arabia, while the country hosted its third Dakar Rally. Oman hosted the annual Tour of Oman international professional cycling event, while other international events in tennis, golf, football, basketball, and rugby 7s were staged in the Arabian Peninsula.

Beyond the world of international sporting spectacles, the PIF of Saudi Arabia financed and launched the inaugural and lucrative golf 'super league' known as LIV Golf: acting as a direct challenge to the hegemony of the PGA Tour. For the first time Saudi Arabia sent an athlete to the Winter Olympic Games, and a Saudi-led consortium acquired Newcastle United FC as noted. Other prominent sports clubs have been acquired through the sovereign wealth funds of Qatar and the UAE – Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester City FC respectively. Other sports clubs, leagues and events have signed lucrative sponsorship deals with major Arabian brands such as Emirates, Etihad Airways and Qatar Airways (Koch 2020, Reiche and Brannagan 2022). In 2005 the International Cricket Council (ICC) moved from London to Dubai, shifting the traditional power base of international cricket. Thani and Heenan (2017) argue football's power base is shifting from Europe to the Arabian Peninsula. Some of these states have positioned themselves as influential actors within the global sporting arena. One particular outcome is that their sporting investments could represent a significant turning point in challenging Western scholars' political and sociological understanding of sporting investments and mega-events.

Academically, the relationship between sport and the region has remained relatively marginal and eclectic, with the bulk of scholarship focused on international sporting investment in the context of the 2022 Men's World Cup in Qatar: thus the World Cup is a dominant point of reference throughout. Existing scholarship provides an explanation as to the reasons why Arabian states are

investing in international sports markets and events. Scholars have approached their analysis from sociological, international relations and sport management perspectives (Dun 2014, Henderson 2014, Knez *et al.* 2014, Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 2018, Dorsey 2015, Reiche 2015, Brannagan and Rookwood 2016, Al-Emadi *et al.* 2017, Griffin 2017, 2019, Rookwood 2019, Al Thani 2022, Brannagan and Reiche 2022).

However, there has been a tendency to focus on top-down processes such as soft-power, nation branding and modernisation throughout the academic literature. There is limited academic scholarship which specifically examines power at a micro/meso level such as through intergroup/cultural encounters (Allport 1979 [1954]). This is despite the fact that sporting events have facilitated the contemporary movement of international sports fans, athletes, tourists and other stakeholders to consume sports events in the Arabian Peninsula. Scholarship that does examine micro/meso level processes, especially on local and regional sporting dynamics, such as local sporting histories and women's sporting participation, is often intertwined with wider work focused on sport and the 'Middle East' or 'Arab/Islamic world', taking a marginal position in publications via a single chapter or passing mention (see, for example, Amara 2011, Raab and Khalidi, 2015, Reiche and Sorek 2019, Al-Arian 2022, Reiche and Brannagan 2022). Given contemporary events taking place *within* and *outside* the Arabian Peninsula, and the current stage of debate, we argue the following; first, it is critical to pay attention directly to the region as a significant area of academic inquiry; and second, there is a need to move beyond analysing purely top-down processes to focus on how power is constructed, challenged and (sometimes) manifests from below.

Therefore, a critical review of the literature, which specifically draws attention to the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula states, is a pressing task. It is important to analyse the current knowledge base and identify gaps that remain. This critical review, then, is significant for serving as a direction for future academic research, particularly through rationalising and examining micro/meso power dynamics between sport and the Arabian Peninsula. To begin, the methodological approach taken is outlined, before the review moves onto identifying the key research trends. The conclusion provides a general overview of the literature and reaffirms arguments made throughout by suggesting future directions for research.

### **Method: an integrative review**

Literature reviews are a critical and essential part of the research process. They can provide an extensive overview of relevant published work on a particular topic or field of interest through synthesising the key findings, perspectives and methods, revealing areas where more research is needed (Snyder 2019). Thus, they are useful for evaluating the state of current knowledge and mapping the development of any given topic or field of inquiry over time. This permits any gaps within the existing knowledge base to be identified while serving to create future research agendas (Roy *et al.* 2012, Snyder 2019). The integrative review is particularly useful for synthesising and critiquing literature on emerging topics or fields of inquiry to identify new theoretical frameworks and different research paths to emerge. Consequently, the purpose of an integrative review is not necessarily to cover all published articles on a given topic but rather to identify key themes and insights (Torraco 2005).

In this critical review several digital academic databases (e.g. TandFonline, Emerald, Science Direct, SAGE and Google Scholar) were used as tools to search for academic publications on sport and the Arabian Peninsula. A series of key words were used to search for relevant published work, these included: 'sport and the Arabian Peninsula', 'the 2022 World Cup', 'Qatar World Cup', 'sport and society in the Arabian Peninsula', 'sport and; Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen', 'sport and the Gulf states', 'sport events in; Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, and Yemen'. From the resulting search, articles were saved onto Mendeley Reference Manager under the tab 'sport and the Arabian Peninsula'. The abstracts were reviewed for each published article, removing any which were not considered relevant to the review. Once the

applicable material was identified, key authors, findings, methods, samples, and geographical focus and location of authors and journal publishers were examined. The final sample size consisted of 51 peer-reviewed, published articles (published between 1989–2022).

Furthermore, this critical review draws primarily on peer-reviewed articles published in English by international platforms. Given the geographical context of this study it is highly likely that further published work is available on the topic in the region, in other languages, providing a local perspective rather than an international one. While this body of literature is unfortunately excluded from the current article, this is compensated for to an extent as some of the authors are from the Arabian Peninsula, or work at universities in the region, such as Georgetown University's satellite campus in Doha.

## **Investing in the international sporting arena and the Arabian Peninsula**

Investing in international sport is, as previously noted, not a new phenomenon across the Arabian Peninsula, with sport previously utilised by governments for nation building projects and development, e.g. from 1986–1989 the Emirate of Dubai hosted the Dubai Champions Cup which was contested between the champions of the English and Scottish professional football leagues. However, the contemporary acceleration of sporting investments made by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain since 2005 makes international sport and the region a site of particular academic interest.

Most countries in the Arabian Peninsula are investing in international sporting markets, as well as other non-hydrocarbon fields such as tourism, to diversify and sustain their economies away from becoming overdependent on the sale and exportation of oil and liquefied natural gas (Reiche 2015, Elbanna 2016, Muhanna Al Naimi 2022). An oil-based economic framework is not sustainable considering the dynamic nature of oil prices in the global economy coupled with a finite supply of oil reserves available to nations from the region (Mishrif and Al Balushi 2017). For instance, the *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* acknowledged that, within 100 years, oil reserves would be depleted in the region, except for Kuwait (cited in Reiche 2010, p. 2398). Thus, the development of sport along with other non-hydrocarbon sectors is closely integrated with the desire of some Arabian states to transform their political economies, while additionally contributing to local development initiatives known as National Vision strategies (Scharfernort 2012, Henderson 2014, Dorsey 2015). Each Arabian state has developed their own, unique National Vision strategy to target different political, economic, social and cultural objectives. Attracting foreign investment and tourism is significant for achieving diversification objectives, with Amara (2008, 2017) asserting sport events, in particular, present Arabian states with an opportunity to market themselves to the outside world as they signal they are 'open for business'. The utilisation of sport then plays an important role in integrating their economies within the international sporting and economic arena.

## **Theme 1: soft-power and the Arabian Peninsula**

The first key overarching theme identified within this review deals with top-down processes around the sporting investments of Arabian states within the international sporting arena. There is a consensus in the literature that Arabian states are investing in global sport to support political and diplomatic objectives within the international arena (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 2018, Reiche 2015, Amara 2017, Rookwood 2019, Al Thani 2022). The bulk of scholarship within this theme has drawn upon the International Relations scholar Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. Soft power is concerned with the power of persuasion, specifically between nation states, and is focused on top-down processes. At its core, soft power is the ability of one state to appeal to and influence, another through economic or cultural influence without the use of force or coercion, unlike hard power (Nye 2004). Sport is considered a powerful means for acquiring and exhibiting soft power, considering little else attracts as much mass participation and spectatorship (Reiche 2015, for a broader

discussion on soft power and sport see, Grix *et al.* 2019, Jarvie 2021). For Amara (2017), investing in sport affords Arabian states particular power outcomes or rewards as they can achieve significant influence in the decision-making process of international sport. It permits individual countries from the region an opportunity to signal their desire to engage with other nations, and to perhaps acquire preferential access to investment opportunities (Chadwick 2019).

One popular approach to acquire soft power has been through investing in sports markets outside of the Arabian Peninsula. For instance, through the commercial activities of major state airlines in the region such as Etihad Airways, Emirates and Qatar Airways, some of the Arabian states have a significant profile in the world of sport. Notable examples include: the sponsorship of European football and sports teams (e.g. Arsenal, Olympique Lyon, Real Madrid, S.L Benfica: Emirates; Manchester City and New York City: Etihad; and Paris Saint-Germain and the Sydney Swans Australian Football League (AFL) team: Qatar Airways); sponsorship of sporting events and naming rights (e.g. Qatar Classic Squash Championship: Qatar Airways; and European Golf Tour events like the Dubai Duty Free Irish Open in Ireland and the PIF Saudi International Powered by SoftBank in Saudi Arabia). The UAE and Qatar have been the most assertive in their approach towards sponsorship within the international sporting arena. Krzyzaniak (2016), for instance, explored the soft power strategies of the UAE and Qatar by analysing various political and journalistic narratives. The author revealed how both nations have positioned themselves as leaders in the art of sport sponsorship, especially in the world of football. Investing in 'top-tier' football teams such as Arsenal, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid through state-owned corporations yields the highest soft power returns for Arabian states. However, Krzyzaniak (2016) fails to articulate what soft power gains the Arabian states have acquired through sport. Without providing evidence of these advantages, the author is speculating on the significant role of sport sponsorship in acquiring soft power. Providing a measurement of soft power gains is crucial for developing a deeper understanding on this relationship and the utilisation of sport sponsorship in general.

A second and significant tool used by Arabian states to acquire soft power has been through bidding for and hosting sports events. Indeed, as Griffin (2019) asserts, most of the scholarship has focused on sport events and the Men's Football World Cup in particular. These studies are preliminary in nature given their pre-tournament publication, yet scholars agree that Qatar's successful bid to host the World Cup is a demonstration of the country's use of soft power to announce themselves to the rest of the world – a process supported by FIFA (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015, Brannagan and Rookwood 2016, Rookwood 2019, Al Thani 2022). Dorsey (2014: 1744), for instance, acknowledged Qatar is using the World Cup to 'build the soft power it needed to compensate for its lack of military hard power'. Similarly, drawing on semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Qatar's sports industry and document analysis, Reiche (2015) asserts Qatar is using the World Cup to acquire soft power and for security reasons (e.g. for national defence due to the country's small population and military force), while building relations with multiple states in order to do so. For Al Thani (2022), the World Cup presented an opportunity for Qatar to dispel negative images of the country and to promote its cultural values to international audiences. These studies reveal the dual purposes of seeking soft power gains: in the context of Qatar, soft power permits the state to leverage security concerns, while it serves to promote the nation on the international stage.

Despite the pretence of soft power acquisition within Qatar and the wider region, there are unintended consequences of leveraging sport and events for soft power objectives. Some scholars are sceptical, noting how any attempt at achieving political and diplomatic objectives has instead resulted in negative media coverage and perceptions towards the region (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 2018, Brannagan and Rookwood 2016). Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015, 2018) argue that by winning the rights to host the World Cup a spotlight was shone on Qatar's problematic human rights record, culminating in *soft disempowerment* as opposed to soft power gains. Soft disempowerment refers to 'those occasions in which [a state] may upset, offend, or alienate others, leading to a loss of attractiveness or influence' (Brannagan and Rookwood 2016, p. 706). Using semi-structured interviews with international football supporters at five major international tournaments, Brannagan and



Rookwood (2016) identified three key themes that have led to soft disempowerment. These are Qatar's perceived lack of a footballing culture, and the lack of infrastructure required to host the event; allegations of bribery and corruption in the bidding process for the tournament; and the cultural backdrop of Qatar and their domestic policies, including a lack of rights for women and the LGBT community, and the maltreatment of migrant workers. This body of work provides a somewhat critical commentary, revealing several hurdles that must be overcome to acquire any political and diplomatic outcomes from leveraging sport and the World Cup in particular.

In a more recent study, however, while acknowledging the need for Qatar to overcome several hurdles, Al Thani (2022) rejects the claims of soft disempowerment. Using interviews with key stakeholders from the Qatari bidding team, the author argues there is a belief that Western, liberal and secular countries have resorted to biased reporting on the World Cup, contributing to the negative perceptions of the country internationally. In particular, some study participants – perhaps predictably given their positions – argued Qatar has unfairly been singled out concerning human rights and labour issues within the country. Whether or not the level of international scrutiny has been excessive, or even prejudiced, various sporting events in different parts of the world (such as Brazil, China, and Russia) have not been free from criticism (Horne 2018). Nonetheless, for Al Thani (2022), Qatar has made great strides in reforming the *Kafala* labour system and has engaged with international criticism in a proactive way, thus restoring soft power gains. Despite this author's uncritical adoption of 'soft power', the potential bias amongst the interview sample group – given their stakeholder position, and the unsubstantiated claim that Qatar has 'restored its soft power' – the article is notable for providing a space for Qatari voices and opinions to be heard. This is critical for bringing more diverse, nuanced and localised perspectives into the debate.

The scholarly treatment of soft power as an explanatory tool as to why Arabian states are investing in sport acts as a theoretical straitjacket, however; one that ignores how power is constructed and challenged from below. Geographer Natalie Koch (2018, 2020) is critical of scholars embracing soft power, arguing it 'depoliticises some very political processes ... [and] tends to mischaracterise the nature of power itself, treating itself as something that is "held" or "wielded"' (Koch 2018, 2015). A more grounded approach towards understanding the broader geopolitical interactions of countries from the Arabian Peninsula is needed – one that acknowledges the complicity of Western, liberal and secular actors and institutions for seeking the wealth of some Arabian states and political favour (ibid.). Further, framing any analysis from above (e.g. top-down processes) obscures the fact the 'state' as such does not independently exist, as it interacts with, and is made up of, a myriad of actors, narratives and materialities. For example, Koch's (2018) ethnographic study of the 2016 World Cycling Championship in Doha observes how identity narratives constructed by the 'state' are endorsed and challenged by athletes, participants and spectators in everyday spaces not predetermined by the organising polity.

While the influence of soft power as a dominant theoretical lens to view the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula is contentious and limiting, its application facilitates an understanding of the socio-political objectives of investing in sport *within* and *outside* the region. Additionally, it reveals the challenges faced by the Arabian states in their quest to become powerful actors in the world of sport. However, further scholarship is required which seeks to analyse how power is constructed and challenged at micro and meso levels. Through analysing the intergroup encounters and experiences of spectators, athletes and staff in everyday sport event spaces such as in stadia, hotels, public parks and so forth it becomes possible to analyse how dominant discourses predetermined by the organising polity are endorsed, negotiated or challenged. The next section critically reviews the literature on the outward image projection of the Arabian Peninsula states in and through sport, and how this has been interpreted amongst scholars.

## Theme 2: nation branding or 'sportswashing'?

Above and beyond the focus on soft power, a second key theme within the literature pivots towards the outward image projection of Arabian states as they attempt to showcase what they

have to offer to the outside world (Rookwood 2019). A small body of literature has argued the Arabian states, especially Qatar, are attempting to harness international sports and events as a nation branding tool (see, for example, Ginesta and San Eugenio 2014, Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 2018, Rookwood 2019). Nation branding is perceived as an asset to nations, rivalling geopolitics and traditional considerations of power (Anholt 2007). Consequently, nation branding is often intertwined with, and overlaps with, soft power, although the former specifically focuses on how a nation communicates to the outside world in a bid to attract tourism, investment and to counter negative stereotypes (Fan 2008, Kamrava 2013, Rookwood 2019). In contrast, soft power relates to acquiring power outcomes within the international community, particularly the ability to influence other nations in preference of their own regarding foreign policy objectives (such as addressing security concerns). Fan (2008) asserts that nation branding can influence a country's ability to acquire soft power, although the latter is not considered a direct consequence of nation branding. Thus, thematically, it is productive to explore each concept separately to discern how each are understood.

Sport events, in particular, have been used as important tools for nations to re-imagine and re-construct particular visions and narratives of themselves (Roche 2000, 2017). They permit host nations an opportunity to counter negative internationally held stereotypes and outdated misconceptions that might have previously shaped sport event attendees' consciousness (Rookwood 2019). For instance, the 2006 World Cup in Germany has been well documented as an event celebrating German culture, changing unfavourable international attitudes, and establishing the nation as hospitable, welcoming and a potential trading partner (Florek *et al.* 2008, Grix and Brannagan 2016). However, as Stuart Hall (1980) argued, images and discourses are 'negotiated'. Intended receivers of information (in this case other countries and people) are not passive receptors as they can make their own meaning through a process of negotiation. This section reviews the academic literature on the branding messages of Arabian states, as well as briefly analysing how these messages are resisted and challenged within Western, putatively liberal and secular societies.

Within the Arabian Peninsula various branding strategies have been adopted which focus on achieving communication outcomes. For instance, alongside sport, the UAE adopted a nation branding strategy focused upon international and regional communications (Dinnie 2015), tourism (Gray 2017), and investment in hospitality and business (Zeineddine 2017) to define and promote the nation. In Saudi Arabia, technology, science and agriculture, coupled with sport and a selective tourism approach, are used to differentiate the country and brand themselves to the outside world (Avraham 2020). Qatar is using sport to brand the nation as a modern monarchy state as they present a discourse of (claiming) modernity, and as a significant sporting hub in the international sporting arena (Ginesta and San Eugenio 2014, Amara and Ishac 2021). Sport, then, amongst other sectors, is used in the Arabian Peninsula to reimagine and reconstruct particular images to the international community.

Nation branding is a complex process though. Anholt (2007) asserts individuals from different societies do not necessarily have the time, resources or inclinations to learn about other nations. What is understood about different nations and cultures is framed within an ideological milieu of a host nation, such as an educational curriculum, or through local, regional and national media frames. How the media represents a particular nation or region exists within this ideological milieu as representations are often simplified, revert to stereotypes, and based on individual's own constructions of meaning, thus, shaping knowledge around other nations and challenging nation-branding strategies. For instance, drawing on interviews with football journalists, international supporters, and experienced tournament staff and volunteers, Rookwood (2019) highlights how nation branding is often negotiated. In the context of the lead-up to the World Cup in Qatar the author reveals how certain discourses have had an adverse impact on the country's image. These include perceived organisational and cultural challenges such as the restrictions for female supporters and the cultural expectations of those who do attend the event, the access and restrictions placed on LGBT supporters, and concern about terrorist activity in the region more broadly.



Similar themes emerge through the media's pre-tournament coverage of the World Cup in Qatar where the state has been routinely criticised (Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2016 *et al.*, Griffin 2017). In fact, Samuel-Azran *et al.* (2016), drawing on a content analysis of three international networks (Sky, CNN, and ITV), contend coverage (between August 2013 – December 2014) on Qatar's sporting interests produced more negative coverage towards the country than reporting towards other issues, such as Qatar's alleged support for Islamic terrorism. The authors note media coverage has been more sympathetic towards such allegations mostly because Qatar is perceived as a partner of Western, liberal and secular societies in their fight against terrorism e.g. the country often acts as an intermediary between states, acting as a neutral mediator to arbitrate international conflicts (*ibid.*). In contrast, sports coverage has been critical, especially in relation to bribery and corruption allegations made throughout the bidding process of the World Cup. Griffin (2017) argues some of the media's representations of Qatar and the World Cup comprise an Orientalist discourse that positions the state as a potential cultural threat to the hegemony of the West (see also Hussain and Cunningham 2022). In particular, Griffin (2017) highlights how *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* newspapers in the UK represent Qatar as an exotic, unwanted 'Other' in their coverage of sport, which has little relevance to the actual cultural challenges the country faces. Both studies highlight how competing discourses in Western, liberal and secular societies act to disrupt and challenge the nation branding strategies of states – especially those in the Arabian Peninsula.

Beyond the academic literature, 'sportswashing' has emerged as a dominant discourse amongst sports journalists seeking to frame the relationship between international sport and events and the Arabian Peninsula. The term refers to attempts predominantly – but certainly not exclusively – by authoritarian regimes to improve their tarnished international reputations especially in regard to human rights concerns, through sport (Lenskyj 2020, Dubinsky 2021, Boykoff 2022, Skey 2022). Originally coined online by *Vice* in 2015 in the context of the European Games in Azerbaijan (Christie 2015), the term has strongly established itself within the vernacular of the British media and has been popularised by Amnesty International. Writing in *The Guardian*, Karim Zidan (2022) draws on the recent takeover of Newcastle United by a Saudi-backed consortium as one of the most prominent examples of 'sportswashing' to date. Two years prior in the same newspaper Richards (2020) acknowledges the role of Formula 1 in aiding 'sportswashing' in Bahrain, asserting the state are using the event to gloss over political oppression – such as the freedom to protest. Although it is difficult to measure how successful 'sportswashing' is and how this discourse influences sports fans' and laypersons' perceptions of certain countries, it illustrates how nation branding attempts are 'negotiated' and challenged (Hall 1980).

Academically, 'sportswashing' has received limited treatment, with only a handful of scholars addressing the term conceptually or in passing (Lenskyj 2020, Dubinsky 2021, Dun *et al.* 2022, Mutter 2022, Fruh *et al.* 2022, Boykoff 2022, Skey 2022). In the context of the Arabian Peninsula, Fruh *et al.* (2022) commentary addresses the term from a philosophical position to highlight the perceived moral ills of 'sportswashing'. These moral ills are twofold; first, the term functions to make sports fans, athletes and coaches complicit in washing over the human rights records of particular Arabian states (e.g. by supporting a sports team, spending money at a sporting event etc.), although they are not directly involved in the wrongdoing of other countries; second, Fruh *et al.* (2022, p. 9) argue 'sportswashing' 'corrupts the values embedded in sporting culture' by debasing the sporting heritage of sports clubs, and by eroding the importance of sporting and communal values within local communities. By uncritically embracing the term these authors not only fail to provide a nuanced explanation of why Arabian states are investing in sport, but also perceive modern sport in evangelical terms as a moral good. Such a perspective is a fallacy that ignores the ample examples of scholarship questioning the 'power of sport' rhetoric (Darby *et al.* 2007, Thibault 2009, Coalter 2010, Levermore 2011, Darnell 2012).

The lack of scholarly treatment of 'sportswashing' arguably stems from the often one-dimensional understanding of the term. Undoubtedly, some Arabian states are using sport to project and brand themselves to the outside world. However, as this critical review identifies, sporting investment is

intertwined with broader political, economic, social and cultural objectives of these states, such as contributing towards National Vision strategies intended to promote human development in achieving health, lifestyle and community-based goals, and to drive economic and industrial activity (Chadwick *et al.* 2022). Moreover, usage of the term is paradoxical. As Lenskyj (2020) asserts, while investing in sports and events does result in unintended consequences like increased media scrutiny of human rights issues, it is the utilisation of sport that brings attention to these issues, as opposed to using sport to wash over particular issues. Without sporting investment, human rights records in the Arabian Peninsula might have remained relatively marginal in Western media. Furthermore, there is an assumption that 'sportswashing' can only occur in *Other* (non-Western) countries such as in Arabian Peninsula states where injustices are perpetrated. Boykoff's (2022, p. 7) useful typology of 'sportswashing' dispels this assumption asserting, it 'is not just the domain of autocrats: it can transpire in putative democracies where elected officials vow to leverage social change through hosting mega-events' (see also, Lenskyj 2020, Skey 2022). The term, then, is of limited value in explaining the sporting dynamics in the Arabian Peninsula, given it is one dimensional, top-down, sensationalist and perpetuates a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'.

The dominant discourse on 'sportswashing' illustrates how forms of power, in this case nation branding, are challenged from above in Western media. To some degree this discourse will influence and shape sports fans' and the general public's perceptions and attitudes towards the Arabian Peninsula more broadly, affecting any nation-branding attempt. However, there is a notable absence of scholarship (except for Brannagan and Rookwood 2016, Koch 2018, Rookwood 2019) on how power is constructed, manifested and challenged *from below*. Intergroup experiences and engagements with Arabian states can act as a site of contestation where dominant media discourses or branding messages are challenged or endorsed (Allport 1979 [1954]). For example, Millward (2011) has argued supporters of Manchester City seemingly embraced investment from an Abu Dhabi backed consortium forming legitimising identities through their newfound wealth. Similarly, some Newcastle United supporters were seen waving the flag of Saudi Arabia and adorning white *thawbs* (traditional Saudi dress) accompanied by *keffiyeh* headdresses at their team's matches (Brown 2021). At the same time, other supporters and commentators challenge such practices. Newcastle United supporters from the Yemeni Muslim community in South Shields, for example, have raised their concerns and criticised the takeover of Newcastle United due to human rights concerns and the ongoing civil war in Yemen (Uddin 2021).

To provide a rich analysis of the power dynamics of sporting investment *within* and *outside* the Arabian Peninsula, scholarship should seek to further extrapolate the intergroup encounters and experiences of sports fans, athletes, event volunteers, commentators and the local community (Allport 1979 [1954]). In particular, understanding the intergroup encounters between those who travel to the region for sport and local residents can help to examine how nation branding is endorsed or challenged in everyday event spaces. Whether intergroup contact can have symbolic transformations on those who travel to the region more broadly is yet to be seen. The next section critically reviews further case studies, focused on impacts and experiences.

### Theme 3: case studies: impacts and experiences

As this critical review has highlighted, the socio-political objectives of some Arabian states' sporting investment have dominated the current and emerging debate on the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula. Wider scholarship on the region provides an essential diversion from the above discourses, focusing instead on other issues and impacts. This body of work is eclectic and does not follow a common theoretical approach or have a common theme running throughout the analysis. The articles are a mixture of empirical enquiry and commentary. An examination of this work is necessary as it provides further depth to the discussion, while noting further areas for academic investigation.

This scholarship addresses the potential impacts of Arabian states' sporting investment and events, for individual Arabian states and the region (Griffin 2019, Al-Khalifa and Al-Khalifa 2021). Griffin (2019) considers the 2022 World Cup as a catalyst for change for Qatari culture and society. He argues it provides a space for the country to address specific issues, such as the treatment of migrant workers and the development of women's sport, in a manner which coexists with, rather than surrenders to, external values and norms. Regional events such as the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Women's Games – a multi-sporting event – can also impact development within the region. Al-Khalifa and Al-Khalifa (2021), drawing on an ethnographic account of participating in the games, assert the event contributed towards a common identity amongst GCC women, as the participants felt united, pride and a collective identity. This was despite the authorities not endorsing a collective regional, GCC identity. This case study, in particular, highlights the 'quiet politics' of encounter whereby the participants developed a sense (temporarily) of belonging (Askins 2015) not predetermined by an organising polity.

The significance and scale of investing in international sport and events undoubtedly has an impact on local communities living within particular Arabian states. Al Emadi *et al.* (2022) and Azim-Ahmed (2017) have begun to unpick these impacts by analysing the attitudes and perceptions of local communities towards sport events. Overwhelmingly, in the context of the Qatar World Cup and the Hail International Rally in Saudi Arabia, residents have shown considerable support for these events, notably praising the perceived economic boost and improvements to urban facilities. Contrastingly, in Qatar residents and expatriates alike shared concerns relating to traffic, pollution and price increases because of hosting the World Cup (Al Emadi *et al.* 2022). By focusing on residents and expatriates, these studies provide a much-needed bottom-up approach, providing an important space for local voices to be heard. However, with studies representative of pre-event scholarship, more longitudinal research is required to adequately capture the social and cultural impacts of sport events before, during and after.

Further preliminary studies have begun to develop an understanding of how international sport events staged in the Arabian Peninsula could have an impact on the socio-cultural experiences of sport event tourists (Dun 2014, Henderson 2014, Morakabati *et al.* 2014). Given the fact all countries within the region are non-secular, Islamic societies with varying interpretations of Islam and Islamic law it is likely some socio-cultural differences will exist which sport event tourists and local communities will both have to navigate and manage. In Qatar the availability of alcohol is limited, with alcohol and public intoxication forbidden as part of the Islamic Sharia. Dun (2014) argued this could challenge a crucial experience for many football fans whose fandom centres on the consumption of alcohol. Public displays of intimacy and an adherence of a strict conservative dress code are also observed in Qatar, which Henderson (2014) noted could lead to potential cultural clashes between travelling fans and local Qataris. Whether or not these social and cultural differences will have a significant impact on sport event tourists remains to be seen. During the World Cup in Qatar social and cultural clashes were evident. For instance, a group of female Welsh supporters wearing rainbow-coloured bucket hats (in support of LGBT rights) were confronted by security prior to entering the Ahmed bin Ali Stadium and had their hats confiscated (Weatherby 2022). Some concessions may be afforded to fans through a process of negotiation between international sporting bodies (e.g. FIFA) and host nations in the Arabian Peninsula where events are staged. However, concessions may be purely used as rhetorical devices to appease travelling sports fans' – as evident a few days before the World Cup in Qatar, where the state swiftly reversed its original decision to allow the sale of alcohol at official World Cup venues. Therefore, there is a need to unpack the event experiences of those travelling to the Arabian Peninsula for sporting events, not only to shed light upon personal experiences, but also to determine if said experiences can impact attitudes and perceptions towards the region, Muslims, and Islam beyond the event itself.

## Theme 4: the relationship between the global and local

In the Arabian Peninsula, sport has also been used *within* the region as a tool for development and thus should not be viewed solely in a global/international context. Instead, sport exists alongside both regional and local individualities, reflecting the 'glocalisation' argument of Giulianotti and Robertson (2004). Joining international sporting federations such as the International Olympic Committee, and hosting sport events like the 2005 Asian Games and the 2019 World Athletics Championships, have permitted Qatar to present itself as a modern nation state within the world system. This enables the country to simultaneously construct a distinctive and 'authentic' Arab culture and identity *within* (Amara 2005, Rolim Silva 2014). Accelerating global forces, therefore, have not homogenised states within the region; instead, sport is used in a distinctive manner. Al Droushi and Henry (2020), for instance, argue Oman draws on international sport to raise the profile of its history and culture, rather than seek integration into the world system. Athletics in particular, while sharing general features of globalisation and modernity (such is its codification), is developed in Oman to reflect local cultural traditions and religion.

This glocalised approach to sport development also exists within specific sporting cultures or fandoms. In Qatar, globalising forces such as the increased commercialisation and professionalisation of football are perceived to be weakening the allure of the Qatari professional league, as fans tune into European football to a greater degree. Lysa (2020) argues that despite this, Qataris still have strong associations with local professional teams as they are strongly influenced by local tribal identities that persist within the country. The role of traditional tribal identities thus attempts to safeguard local footballing culture from the forces of globalisation.

The role of tradition, especially the projection of a distinct Arab culture, is central to debates on globalisation and modernisation *within* the Arabian Peninsula. Traditional localised sports such as camel racing and falconry have been used to challenge the social and cultural dynamics accelerated by globalisation and modernisation (Khalaf 1999, Koch 2015, Krawietz 2020). Each sport is used as a tool to build the modern nation state while serving to preserve a sense of tradition. Yet, as Khalaf (1999) asserts, the revival of camel racing is paradoxical. Globalising forces such as the exportation of oil, television, the car and the commercial aspect of reproducing camel racing to a regional and local audience have significantly advanced the sport's revival over the past 40 years (Khalaf 1999). Moreover, these traditional sports are also the site of inequality within the region. Falconry, for instance, has been harnessed by local elites to construct an ethnic and gendered vision for a primordial Arab culture, one that marginalises non-citizens and women in framing *who* 'Gulf nations' are (Koch 2015, Krawietz 2020). Such sports, then, act to preserve a local and regional 'Arab identity', yet they are also the site of unequal power relations in society, as certain actors define *who* and *what* 'Arab identity' is or consists of.

The inherent tension between on the one hand embracing globalising forces and on the other preserving local tradition causes several frictions within the Arabian Peninsula. Particular groups such as women are marginalised and subjugated to differing degrees throughout the region. Scholars have argued that an embrace of modern sport and globalisation can permit a space for progressive, albeit slow, social and cultural transformations to take place (Harkness 2012, Knez *et al.* 2014, Lysa 2019). Knez *et al.* (2014) asserted the World Cup in Qatar can act as a catalyst for change enabling Qatari women to navigate their sporting participation alongside societal and Islamic norms (e.g. dress codes and expected gendered behaviour). However, significant barriers still exist to sport participation, especially in Qatar (Harkness 2012, Lysa 2019). These barriers include strict gender segregation roles, families and family reputations, religion, changing gender dynamics and the relatively small population size of the country. This is one social challenge which will persist in the region as Arabian states continue to embrace modern sport and globalisation.

Furthermore, given the predominant focus on the World Cup in Qatar within the academic literature – and indeed in this critical review – the relationship in other Arabian states, especially in terms of sports mega-events remains under-explored. However, given the wealth of upcoming

events in the region – including the 2029 Asian Winter Games in Saudi Arabia: the 2030 and 2034 Asian Summer Games in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, respectively, and other annual international sporting competitions (e.g. Formula 1 in Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) – they need to be included and examined in future research in this field.

## Conclusion and suggestions for future research

The growing significance of sport in the Arabian Peninsula as a tangible political, economic, social and cultural tool for development is evident. Some of the Arabian states, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are leveraging power within the international sporting arena far beyond their borders through sponsorship and ownership of European football teams, staging international sports events and significantly investing in sport media (Amara 2008, 2017). From the examples cited in this critical review, and the growing scholarly interest in sport and the Arabian Peninsula, particular Arabian states are on their way to presenting a tangible challenge to existing sporting hegemonies by becoming increasingly influential powers within the international sporting arena. This integrative review sought to identify the key trends and issues in which sport and the Arabian Peninsula intersect to highlight this relationship. While there is an emerging scholarly interest on the region, there remain significant gaps in terms of academic knowledge around sport *within* and *outside* the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, this concluding section discusses those lacunae and suggests future directions for academic inquiry.

First, the tendency to focus on top-down processes such as soft-power and nation branding does not allow for a rich, in-depth picture to develop on how power is constructed, resisted and challenged, and how it manifests from below. Echoing Natalie Koch (2018), there is a need for further critical sociological analysis which examines power at a micro-level in everyday event spaces in the Arabian Peninsula. In particular, understanding the ‘politics of encounter’ between multiple actors’ experiences, engagements, and perceptions of travelling to the region in the context of sport is critical for building a knowledge base on intergroup/cultural experiences. This can help to establish how such experience can have symbolic social and cultural impacts on multiple actors’ attitudes towards Muslims, Islam, and the Arabian Peninsula beyond a sporting context itself (Allport 1979, Askins 2015). Currently, no scholarly investigation has been afforded to understanding intergroup/intercultural relations via sport within the region (see, also Hussain and Cunningham 2022).

Second, most of the scholarship on the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula draws on Qatar, specifically the 2022 World Cup, as a case study. This is unsurprising given the significance of the World Cup as a truly global sports mega-event, yet this research reveals little about the local, regional, and global sporting dynamics of Qatar’s neighbours. Scholarship needs to look beyond the World Cup and Qatar to truly capture the growing significance of sport in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman, and to develop literature on sport in Kuwait and Yemen respectively. Each state’s individual use of sport within and outside of the international sporting arena provides important insight into dynamics in this field and potentially provides a basis for rethinking existing, dominant political and sociological understanding of sporting investment and mega-events. For instance, what role do sport and events play in transforming societies across the region? Can local and regional identities co-exist alongside the influence and acceleration of modern sport and event hosting within the Arabian Peninsula? How can the ‘politics of encounter’ challenge dominant Western discourses and stereotypes such as ‘sportswashing’ on the region? Indeed, can the intercultural experiences relating to sporting investments overseas and the encounters of sport event tourists in the region for sport events contribute to mitigating social issues such as racial prejudice, religious discrimination and xenophobia? While these questions are not intended to be prescriptive, they underscore the requisite scope, breadth, depth and international focus of any critical investigation and concomitant research literature on sport in/and on the Arabian Peninsula.

By shifting the focus away from top-down processes, more innovative methodologies and diverse epistemologies can be incorporated into scholarship on sport and the Arabian Peninsula. For

instance, there is a need to understand the life cycle of an event by adopting longitudinal research designs aimed at examining intergroup/cultural attitudes and experiences via sport *before, during* and *after* an event has taken place in the region. Moreover, the use of diverse methods, including diary research, photo-elicitation interviews, netnography and audio-visual methods should be drawn upon to understand the significance of sport in the Arabian Peninsula in more compelling ways and to facilitate the inclusion of hitherto marginalised voices (Hussain and Cunningham 2022). Scholars should consider potential opportunities and barriers of conducting research in non-secular, Islamic societies such as the Arabian Peninsula where the research orthodoxies of Global North academic institutions may not apply. In particular, undertaking research with migrant workers or women may be restricted for academic researchers (of differing backgrounds and for varying reasons), while recording videos or taking photographs in public or private spaces could raise suspicion or lead to arrest. However, this may, inadvertently, integrate and include more diverse and situated knowledges and insights, with local researchers potentially permitted greater access than perceived 'outsiders'. Research in this region, as in all others, is therefore a matter of privilege, politics and positionality.

Finally, more internationally-situated theoretical frameworks should be applied to contribute effectively to the proposals articulated in this article. Intergroup contact theory and Orientalism (Allport 1979 [1954]), (2003) would provide edifying approaches to illuminate and analyse existing power relations, and frame intergroup/cultural attitudes and experiences towards the Arabian Peninsula. Similarly, theoretical frameworks which have emerged outside of the Global North such as decolonial theory and Islamic feminism could be fruitful (Yamani 1996, Mignolo 2011). Not only would such theories provide a non-Western lens, but they would also contribute to addressing inequalities of power and opportunity within the academic study of sport and the Arabian Peninsula.

Less than a month after the conclusion of the 2022 men's World Cup, the international spotlight once again turned to the Arabian Peninsula. Professional footballer and global superstar Cristiano Ronaldo signed for Saudi Arabian football club Al-Nassr, with a reported annual salary of £177 million. Amnesty International immediately called upon Ronaldo to denounce 'sportswashing' in the region (Martin 2023). It is conceivable, then, that the relationship between sport and politics in the Arabian Peninsula will become even more significant as some Arabian states are arguably exhibiting greater authority within the international sporting arena. Such influence is being achieved through investing in sponsorship deals, hosting international sporting events and even attempting to rival the hegemony of international sporting bodies (e.g. Saudi Arabia and LIV Golf). However, as this critical review identifies, more research is required to extrapolate the relationship between sport and the Arabian Peninsula *within* and *outside* the region, providing a depth of understanding on the political, economic, social and culture transformations occurring within international sport from both a micro and macro lens. The Arabian Peninsula, then, represents not just an area of growth, but one of significant, instructive and timely inquiry for scholars interested in global sport, politics and society as well.

## Disclosure statement

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