

April 2023

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### Recommended Citation

Bocquet, Matthieu and Dalakas, Vassilis (2023) "Nation branding through sports: The impact of Qatar's ownership of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on Qatar's image by French soccer fans," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol12/iss1/6>

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# Nation Branding through Sports: The Impact of Qatar's Ownership of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on Qatar's Image by French Soccer Fans

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**Abstract** – This study examined how French soccer fans perceive Qatar which owns French club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). It compared perceptions of the country among PSG fans, fans of PSG's rival club Olympique Marseille (OM), and fans of other French clubs. Furthermore, it examined how fans' identification with PSG or its rival OM moderated their perceptions of Qatar. PSG fans had more favorable perceptions than the other fans and highly identified PSG fans had more positive perceptions than low-identification PSG fans. However, rival fans did not have more negative perceptions than the other fans and there was also no difference between highly identified and low-identification rival fans.

**Keywords** – nation branding, fan identification, France, liking transfer, Qatar, rivalry, sponsorship, sports marketing

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners** – The research provides insight on understanding how the use of sports partnerships by nations can be helpful in how the nations will be perceived by sports fans. In doing so, it offers theoretical knowledge that will be useful to marketing researchers. It also offers meaningful practical insight that would be of value to educators teaching about branding and/or sports marketing as well as practitioners regarding the benefits of alignment marketing through sports properties.

## Introduction

Nation branding is a process of building the brand identity, image and reputation of a country and has three key elements: brand identity, image, and positioning (Dinnie, 2016). Countries may use sports as a tool to improve their image through winning competitions or medals (Dinnie, 2016), through hosting major sporting events (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002), or through a connection to a sports club by owning it or sponsoring it. For instance, Azerbaijan had partnered with the Spanish club Atletico Madrid as a jersey sponsor with the slogan "Azerbaijan, Land of Fire" on the club jersey and the Tourism Authority of Thailand partnered with Leicester City, another English club, to be its jersey sponsor with the slogan "Thailand smiles with you." Similarly, Rwanda partnered with English club Arsenal with a "Visit Rwanda" slogan on the jerseys, as well as with the French club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). The latter entailed "Visit Rwanda" appearing on the back of the training kit and pre-game warm-up kits of the men's team and also on the sleeve of the kit worn by the women's team during their matches. It also included PSG current and former players traveling to Rwanda and sharing their experiences on PSG social media platforms.

The case of sports sponsorships where country-owned companies (e.g., airlines or energy companies or wealth fund brands) partner with sports clubs is becoming increasingly common as a way for countries to "promote their attractiveness, culture, ideas, and policies through soft power" (Chadwick et al., 2020, p. 196). Related to nation branding in some cases is the concept of sportswashing where sports are used by nations to divert global attention from important issues

facing the nation and improve their global image (Jimenez-Martinez & Skey, 2018; Lenskyj, 2020). In these cases, such regimes pursue hosting major international sport events and/or directly or indirectly partner with international sports properties like governing bodies or clubs. Qatar is one of the nations that has strategically used sports for its nation branding while also being criticized for sportswashing (Zidan, 2022). For the last ten years Qatar has hosted several major sporting competitions (e.g., handball world championship in 2015, cycling in 2016, and athletics in 2019), with the pinnacle being hosting the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup of soccer. The General Secretary of the Qatari Olympic Committee explained in 2011 that the objective would be to host 50 international competitions by 2030 to help Qatar establish a stronger international presence (Koetschet, 2011).

Additionally, a key part of Qatar's strategy of using sport for nation branding was acquiring the French soccer club Paris Saint-Germain. Through the investment of more than 1.5 billion euros by Qatar Sports Investments in 2011, Qatar has used the ownership of the French club to build its image within France but also, due to the club's increasing global appeal, to increase Qatar's visibility and improve its image on a global scale (Chadwick et al., 2018; Nieto, 2019).

In 2013, after the acquisition by Qatar, PSG introduced a new logo that, among other things, highlighted in bigger font the word Paris. The redesign of the brand identity aimed to tie the club more directly to the city of Paris (rather than just the area of Saint-Germain) and the image that Paris represents to people throughout the world in terms of prestige and elegance. Analysts attributed that change to Qatar strategically trying to connect itself to these attributes (Chanavat, 2017). Moreover, after the acquisition by Qatar, PSG bought some globally famous players, like Zlatan Ibrahimovic and David Beckham initially and Neymar Junior, Mbappe, and Lionel Messi in recent years. In addition to their impact on the field, stars of this caliber help the club with gaining increased media coverage and with increasing merchandise sales globally (Chanavat, 2017; Pelit, 2021). They have contributed to PSG's increased popularity in South America and Asia and have all established PSG as a club with global appeal with fans throughout the world. Thus, through this strategy, PSG becoming a global sports brand constitutes a global showcase for Qatar also (Leroy, 2019).

Concerning the impact of PSG on Qatar's image, some (e.g., Côme & Raspaud, 2018; Leroy, 2019) consider that it is positive whereas others (e.g., García & Amara, 2013) doubt it has helped because people may perceive it negatively due to a) Qatar's inexperience with the sport of soccer and b) the perception that foreign ownership may change the club's history and identity. However, no study has been done with French consumers to examine their perceptions of Qatar in relation to the PSG ownership, especially one to consider possible effects of the consumers' team fandom on perceptions of the country.

This study examines nation branding through sports by specifically studying Qatar's ownership of PSG and perceptions of Qatar among French fans, focusing primarily on PSG fans and fans of rival club Olympique Marseille (OM). Our study builds upon previous research on response to sponsorship by sports fans and makes meaningful contributions to the literature by exploring alignment marketing with sports properties specifically in the context of nation branding's potential positive (halo) and negative (pitchfork) effects. The study is particularly timely as it was conducted before the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup that will take place in Qatar. Much negative publicity has been drawn to Qatar in relation to this event making the research on the country's image by soccer fans timely and relevant.

# Conceptual Background

## Nation branding through sports

Having a positive image outside its borders can offer several benefits to a country, including exports of its products, attracting tourists, or attracting businesses (Anholt, 2008). This is why nations, especially smaller ones or lesser-known ones, engage in strategies that intend to help create a positive image (Fan, 2006). Anholt (1998) introduced the notion of *nation branding* to capture the fact that countries have to behave somewhat like brands in establishing and maintaining a favorable image and reputation, which are important for the country to be competitive (Loo & Davies, 2006). Typically, nation branding efforts are strategic activities that try to influence how an international target market perceives the country; in doing so, nation branding may face challenges with overcoming potential negative pre-existing notions or stereotypes the international audience may have about the country (Dinnie, 2016; Fan, 2006; Motsi & Park, 2020).

Sports are a popular way for traditional brands to market themselves. Sports properties themselves engage in strategic branding activities (Dalakas & Rose, 2013). Moreover, both sports-related brands and non-sports brands use alignment marketing where they partner with sports leagues, events, teams, or athletes to accomplish objectives like building brand awareness, improving brand image, and building brand loyalty (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Cornwell et al., 2005). Similarly, due to the passionate following by millions around the world, sports, and especially soccer, can also be a useful tool for nation branding and are used by countries for the same purposes (Côme & Raspaud, 2018; Dinnie, 2016; Grix, 2012; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2000; Roberts, 2016).

A common way of using sports for nation branding is through hosting major international sporting events (especially the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games), which provide key benefits like global media attention, increase in national pride, and potential for improving the country's image after a successful event. These are all key reasons why Qatar, albeit a small country, pursued becoming a host for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. However, ever since FIFA announced Qatar as the host nation of the 2022 tournament, controversy has arisen as substantial criticism and concerns have been and continue to be voiced regarding the country's human rights practices (Liew, 2017; Rookwood, 2019; Zidan, 2022).

Additionally, a country's direct partnership with a foreign sports club can be a meaningful way for nation branding. As mentioned earlier, some countries partner with foreign sports teams through sponsorships promoting directly the country (e.g., on the club's jersey). Sometimes, a country uses its national companies to sponsor teams or major competitions, as is the case of the national oil company SOCAR (State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic) which has been an official sponsor of UEFA's competitions since 2013 and state-owned Russian companies like Aeroflot sponsoring English club Manchester United and Gazprom sponsoring German club Schalke 04 as well as FIFA (Roberts, 2016).

Some Gulf countries have actively pursued this strategy on a higher level with a deliberate effort to acquire and own European soccer clubs (Menetrier, 2020). One of the premier clubs in the English Premier League, Manchester City, is owned by the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia has embarked on a £300 million bid to buy Newcastle, another Premier League club via Saudi Arabian public investment funds. This offer is currently being considered by the Premier League (Menetrier, 2020). Lastly, the focal club for our study, PSG in France, has been owned since 2011 by Qatar Sports Investment, Qatar's sovereign investment fund. Over the last 10 years, Qatar has significantly increased its presence in soccer (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Chanavat, 2017; Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2014). In addition to the acquisition of PSG, Qatar has used its domestic companies like Qatar Airways to sponsor some of the biggest European teams like AS Roma in Italy, Barcelona in Spain, and Bayern Munich in Germany, as well as FIFA (Chadwick et al., 2018).

A detailed account of Qatar’s overall involvement in soccer through club ownership, sponsorship, and hosting of events is presented in Table I.

**TABLE I. Qatar’s soccer strategy through club ownership, sponsorship, and organization of major events**

Investors	Club / Entity	Description of investment
<b>Soccer club ownership</b>		
Qatar Sport Investment	Paris Saint Germain (France)	Owner of PSG Club since its acquisition in 2011. According to L'Équipe (2019), QSI spent more than 1.5 billion euros since its arrival.
Sheikh Abdallah Ben Nasser Al Thani (a member of the Qatar royal family)	Málaga (Spain)	Repurchase of the club in 2010 for €36 million, followed by an investment of €70 million by the sheik who decided to stop investing in the club at the end of 2014.
Hisham Al mana (Qatari businessman)	Parma (Italy)	Repurchase of 51% of the shares for €65 million in 2020 and all the remaining shares within five years.
Qatar Sport Investment	Leeds United (England)	Qatar expressed interest in buying the English club of Leeds United, who returned to the Premier League in 2020-2021.
<b>Sponsorship</b>		
Qatar Airways	FIFA	Premium partner and the official airline for the FIFA World Cup 2018 & 2022 and FIFA eWorld Cup.
	FC Barcelona (Spain)	Between 2011 and 2016, Qatar Airways was the sponsor of the jersey of FC Barcelona, for a total amount of €171 million.
	Bayern München (Germany)	5-year partnership agreements (2018-2023) to sponsor Bayern shirt sleeves, for approximately €10 million annually.
	Boca Juniors (Argentina)	4-year partnership agreements (2018-2022) to be the main sponsor on the Boca Juniors jersey.
	PSG (France)	Premium partner for 3 years (2020-2022) until the FWC 2022, against €5 to €10 million per year.
	AS Roma (Italy)	3-year partnership agreement (2018-2021) to be the main sponsor on the front of the Roma jerseys, for 40 million over the 3 years.
Qatar National Bank	PSG (France)	A major partner of the club since 2012 with €15 million annually. PSG icon Neymar became QNB's global ambassador in 2018.
	Asian Football Confederation	A 3-year partnership between 2014 and 2017 as major commercial partners notably for the Asian Champions League and the AFC Cup.
	Trabzonspor (Turkey)	A 3-year partnership between 2016 to 2019 as the main sponsor of the jersey. The partnership has an estimated value of \$7.5 million.
	Indonesia Super League	Title sponsor of the Indonesian League between 2015 to 2017 which was renamed the QNB League.

Qatar Tourism Authority	PSG (France)	Major sponsors since the ownership of PSG in 2011. QTA has paid very large funds to the PSG: €100M in 2011-2012, €150M in 2012-2013, €200M in 2013-2014). Given the huge amounts, the contract will be discounted by financial fair play. QTA is now a "brand nation" partnership that no longer pays money to PSG.
Ooredoo (Qatar's state-owned telecommunications company)	PSG (France)	One of the major sponsors of PSG since 2013 through the naming of the training center which is called the " Centre d'Entrainement Ooredoo " and a presence on the back of the players' jersey. The contract is valued at €10 million per year.
	Real Madrid (Spain)	Partnership from 2015 to 2017 to develop joint campaigns and activities mainly in Algeria.
	Lionel Messi Foundation	Partnership since 2013 with Léo Messi who became a brand ambassador.
	Tunisian soccer association	4-year commercial agreement (2018-2022) as a major partner of the Tunisian team and have a strong advertising presence during the matches.
BeIN SPORTS (Qatari TV station)	PSG (France)	Official partner since the Qatari takeover of the club and main sponsor of PSG women's jersey. An annual contribution of €3 million.
<b>Organization of major soccer events</b>		
Qatar	FIFA World Cup 2022	Qatar will host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, which is a major part of its nation branding strategy. It represents a huge investment of more than \$200 billion.
	AFC Asian Cup	Qatar has hosted the Asian Cup of Nations twice, in 1988 and again in 2011.

## Liking transfer and disliking transfer

Expecting positive outcomes when aligning with sports clubs can be explained by Heider's balance theory (1958), which states that individuals want balance and harmony in their lives because imbalance causes discomfort. Thus, they will tend to like what is associated with what they already like and will tend to dislike what is associated with what they already dislike (Dalakas & Levin, 2005). In the context of sport and more particularly sponsorship, research has established that the association of a brand with a club elicits positive attitudes towards the brand from the club's fans as the positive feeling they have towards their team will be transferred to the brand that sponsors their team (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Madrigal, 2000, 2001; Smith et al., 2008). This is especially valuable for brands that may have image problems as they can use the connection to the sports club as a way to mitigate such issues and generate more positive responses toward themselves.

While sports fans usually dislike opposing teams, they typically have a stronger dislike toward their rival club. In fact, according to the affective disposition theory (Zillmann et al., 1989), fans' emotional responses in sports range from extreme love (usually for their own team) to extreme hate (usually reserved for their rivals). Therefore, fans are disappointed when their team loses but also when the rival wins and, reversely, they are happy when their own team wins but also when their rival loses. Taking pleasure at a rival's misfortunes is common in sports where fans often experience schadenfreude toward their reviled rivals (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Dalakas et al., 2015; Tyler et al., 2021). Similar to how a liking transfer takes place in terms of fans' responses to brands aligning with their favorite club, a disliking transfer may also occur, where a club's fans

transfer their negative attitudes toward their club's rivals to brands that sponsor the rival (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Grohs et al., 2015).

Previous research has examined this framework within the context of brands sponsoring sports teams. We expect this framework to also apply within the context of countries partnering with sports teams, including the case of Qatar's ownership of PSG, in terms of both positive and negative affective transfer. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H1a:** Fans of Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG) will have a more positive image of Qatar than fans of other French soccer teams.

**H1b:** Fans of Olympique Marseille (OM), rival of PSG, will have a more negative image of Qatar than fans of other French soccer teams.

## **The role of team identification**

While all fans of a club have an affinity for it, the degree of one's fandom in terms of one's identification with the club may vary. Consistent with the social identity theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), for highly identified fans, their favorite sports club is an integral part of their identity, which influences their attitudes and behaviors accordingly. Such fans tend to exhibit biases in their processing of information in a way that views more favorably what is associated with their favorite club (Hickman & Lawrence, 2010; Madrigal & Dalakas, 2008; Smith & Steward, 2010). For example, research has found highly identified fans to attribute their team's victories to internal causes and losses to external causes (Wann & Schrader, 2000) and to perceive favorably fans of their own team and unfavorably fans of opposing teams (Lee et al., 2018; Wann and Dolan, 1994).

A big part of a fan's strong identification with his/her favorite team is establishing a clear distinction between the "in-group" (favorite team) that is viewed favorably and the "out-group" (other teams and especially the rival team) that is viewed unfavorably. As rivalries are an integral part of sports, they reinforce this differentiation on how highly identified fans perceive and respond to the in-group and the out-group (Cobbs et al., 2017; Havard & Dalakas, 2017; Havard et al., 2013). Sponsorship research has consistently found highly identified fans to respond more positively to their team's sponsors, in terms of favorable attitudes and purchase intentions than fans of the same team who have lower levels of identification with the team (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Hickman & Lawrence, 2010). The opposite effect is also present as research has consistently found that, compared to low-identification fans, highly identified fans hold more negative attitudes toward sponsors of their rival teams (Angell et al., 2016; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Davies et al., 2005; Grohs et al., 2015; Olson, 2018) even in the presence of information about high quality of the products of the rival's sponsor (Bee & Dalakas, 2015).

The effects of identification on responses to brand sponsors of a favorite team or a rival team have been confirmed through research in many different countries including USA (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Dalakas & Levin, 2005), Scotland (Davies et al., 2005), Sweden (Bergkvist, 2012), Germany (Grohs et al., 2015), Spain (Dos Santos et al., 2016), France (Herrmann et al., 2016), England (Angell et al., 2016; Olson, 2018), and Taiwan (Lin and Bruning, 2020). We expect to see similar effects in the context of Qatar's ownership of PSG in that the level of team identification of PSG fans will moderate their positive perceptions of Qatar while that of OM fans will moderate their negative perceptions. Thus, we hypothesize that:

**H2a:** PSG fans with a high level of identification with the team have a better image of Qatar than PSG fans with a lower level of identification.

**H2b:** OM fans with a high level of identification to the team have a worse image of Qatar than OM fans with a lower level of identification.

## **Methodology**

### **Instrument**

The survey included questions about overall attitude towards Qatar using a previously validated 7-point scale which measures attitude through four items: bad/good, dislike/like, unpleasant/pleasant and unfavorable/favorable (Bruner et al., 1992). Additionally, we included items on perception of Qatar relating to its governance, its attractiveness as a tourist destination, its attractiveness in terms of immigration and investment (Anholt's Nation Brand Index, 2005), climate, and safety (Yongjae et al., 2019). All were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Moreover, the survey assessed perceptions of Qatar's image specifically relating to sports (e.g., "is legitimate in sport" and "its teams/athletes perform well in sport").

The following part measured the impact of the ownership of PSG on the image of Qatar. At the beginning of this part, the respondents were asked "Do you know that Qatar owns the Paris Saint Germain (PSG) soccer club?" (Yes/No question). Those who answered 'no' were not given access to the following questions and were directed to the next section. Those who indicated they knew, were asked about how favorable they were of that relationship (e.g., "Qatar's ownership of PSG improves my perception of Qatar" and "Qatar's ownership of PSG makes me like Qatar more;" Speed & Thompson 2000) as well as their perceptions of fit between the club and Qatar (e.g., "Qatar and PSG stand for similar things" and "there is a logical connection between Qatar and PSG;" Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Participants were also asked whether the ownership of PSG by Qatar had a positive impact on their level of knowledge, the attractiveness of Qatar in the world and in relation to other Gulf countries, as well as on Qatar's credibility in the sport. Respondents also evaluated the impact of PSG ownership through this question: "Since PSG ownership by Qatar in 2011, would you say that your perception of Qatar has changed?" (from 1 "very negatively" to 5 "very positively").

The survey also measured the level of fan identification with their team. Respondents were asked if they were fans and, if so, the club with which they identify the most. They then answered questions from a modified version of the previously validated Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) in relation to that team. The questionnaire ended with standard demographic questions including gender, age, region of origin and profession. A pre-test with ten people was conducted first to ensure that there were no issues with the questionnaire before administering it.

### **Sample**

Given the focus of the study, the sample was drawn from residents of France. It was shared on social networks including supporters' groups pages of the two teams used in the study. Data collection took place several months before PSG acquired Lionel Messi and almost two years before the 2022 Men's World Cup. A total of 289 respondents completed the survey in its entirety, 41% of whom were female. Median age was within the 25-34 years old bracket. Thirty eight percent of the sample were from the Paris region (home of PSG), 25% from the southeast (home of OM), 20% from the northeast, 9% from the west, and 8% from the southwest. The sample included 84 respondents who identified themselves as PSG fans, 77 as OM fans, 53 as fans of a team other than OM or PSG, and 75 participants who indicated they were not soccer fans.



## Results

A reliability analysis was conducted for each of the scales used in the survey. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .782 to .961 suggesting good to excellent reliability. Specifically, the reliability for each scale was as follows: a) attitude toward Qatar (4 items): .961, b) governance perception (8 items): .841, c) immigration and investment perception (4 items): .836, d) sport perception (5 items): .851, e) sport impact on Qatar image (4 items): .782, f) favorability of Qatar PSG ownership (3 items): .956, g) fit of Qatar PSG ownership (4 items): .792, and h) team identification (7 items): .930. Additionally, for the three constructs measured with two items, the Pearson correlation was as follows: a) tourist destination perception: .600, b) safety perception: .793, and c) climate perception: .836.

## Hypothesis testing

We hypothesized that PSG fans would have more favorable image of and attitude toward Qatar compared to fans of other French soccer teams, due to Qatar's investment in PSG (H1a), whereas fans of PSG rival's OM would have more unfavorable image of and attitude toward Qatar (H1b). To test these hypotheses, we compared the three groups of fans in an ANOVA test the results of which are summarized below in Table II.

**TABLE II. Mean scores for general perception of Qatar by PSG fans, rival OM fans, and other French fans**

Variables	PSG fans (A) N=86	OM fans (B) N=77	Other fans (C) N=53
Qatar attitude	4.34 <sup>B,C</sup>	3.06	2.89
Governance perception	3.12 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.47	2.41
Tourist destination perception	3.02 <sup>B,C</sup>	1.92 <sup>C</sup>	2.39
Immigration & investment perception	3.07 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.23	2.26
Safety perception	3.48 <sup>B,C</sup>	3.08	3.52
Climate perception	3.01 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.75	2.63
Sport perception	2.94 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.24	2.07

<sup>B,C</sup> indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$  between A (PSG fans) and B (OM fans) and between A (PSG fans) and C (other fans).

<sup>C</sup> indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$  between B (OM fans) and C (other fans).

Significance testing indicated that all the differences between PSG fans and the other two groups were significant at .05 level. Similarly, PSG fans had more favorable perceptions of the partnerships between their club and Qatar and the fit between the two, as well as of Qatar's attractiveness and credibility in sport (Table III). Therefore, overall PSG fans had significantly more favorable perceptions than the other fans and H1a was supported. However, when comparing fans of PSG's rival OM with the rest of the fans, only one difference was significant: OM fans had more negative

perceptions of Qatar as a tourist destination. There was no difference in the rest of the variables and, therefore, H1b was not supported.

**TABLE III. Mean scores for perception of PSG/Qatar partnership and Qatar’s attractiveness and credibility in sport by PSG fans, rival OM fans, and other French fans**

Variables	PSG fans (N=86)	OM fans (N=77)	Other Fans (N=53)
Favorability	3.46 <sup>B,C</sup>	1.67	1.87
Fit between Qatar and PSG	3.08 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.46	2.51
Level of knowledge about Qatar	2.94	3.42	2.57
Qatar’s attractiveness in the world	3.81 <sup>B,C</sup>	3.37	3.45
Qatar’s attractiveness compared to other Gulf countries	3.79 <sup>B,C</sup>	3.34	3.47
Qatar’s credibility in sport	3.73 <sup>B,C</sup>	3.08	3.34
Evolution of Qatar perception since PSG ownership	3.62 <sup>B,C</sup>	2.54	2.59

<sup>B,C</sup> indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$  between A (PSG fans) and B (OM fans) and between A (PSG fans) and C (other fans).

To determine if the level of fans’ identification with their team moderated the responses of PSG and OM fans, we first did a median split to determine low-identification PSG fans and highly identified PSG fans, as well as low-identification OM fans and highly identified OM fans. Subsequently, we did an independent-samples T-test to compare the perception of the two PSG fan groups: low fans vs high fans and a similar T-test to compare the two groups of OM fans. The results showed team identification to be important in the case of PSG fans (see Tables IV and V). However, there were no significant differences between low-identification and highly identified OM fans for most of the variables except for immigration and investment perception. Therefore, H2a was supported but H2b was not supported.

**TABLE IV. Mean scores for general perception of Qatar by low-identification and high-identification PSG fans**

Variables	Low identification PSG fans (N=44)	High identification PSG fans (N=42)
Qatar attitude	4.23 (Not significant)	4.46 (Not significant)
Governance perception	2.92 (p<.05)	3.32 (p<.05)
Tourist destination perception	2.75 (p<.05)	3.30 (p<.05)
Immigration & investment perception	2.71 (p<.05)	3.44 (p<.05)
Safety perception	3.42 (Not significant)	3.55 (Not significant)
Climate perception	2.72 (p<.05)	3.31 (p<.05)
Sport perception	2.62 (p<.05)	3.27 (p<.05)

**TABLE V. Mean scores for general perception of Qatar by low-identification and high-identification OM fans**

Variables	Low identification OM fans (N=39)	High identification OM fans (N=38)
Qatar attitude	3.20 (Not significant)	2.93 (Not significant)
Governance perception	2.53 (Not significant)	2.41 (Not significant)
Tourist destination perception	1.85 (Not significant)	1.99 (Not significant)
Immigration & investment perception	2.48 (p<.05)	1.97 (p<.05)
Safety perception	3.01 (Not significant)	3.14 (Not significant)
Climate perception	2.81 (Not significant)	2.70 (Not significant)
Sport perception	2.44 (Not significant)	2.05 (Not significant)
Qatar attitude	3.20 (Not significant)	2.93 (Not significant)

## Discussion and Implications

Consistent with our hypothesis, the results showed an increase in favorability of Qatar's perception among PSG fans consistently across several country image dimensions. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was not a decrease in favorability of Qatar's perception by rival's OM fans compared to other fans. The results confirmed the halo effects on fans of the team owned by Qatar established in previous research but not any pitchfork effects on fans of the rival team. This raises some interesting questions regarding whether nation branding may be different than typical brand branding, at least in terms of responses to partnership of a nation with a sports club compared partnership of a brand with a sports club. This is noteworthy because team identification also seemed to only play a role in regard to responses by the PSG fans but not by the rival OM fans. Therefore, from a theoretical standpoint our research makes a meaningful contribution in suggesting that the context of partnerships with sports teams (nation vs. brand) may play a role in fans' responses to the partner. Of course, it is important to also recognize that often fans have more immediate and direct opportunities to actively avoid purchasing a brand sponsoring a rival. Such opportunities are less plentiful in the context of nations, which may, at least partly, explain the less negative effects on rival fans.

From a practical standpoint, our findings are especially interesting regarding the potential of success of nation branding through a partnership with a sports team and why it may be meaningful for other countries to be launching similar initiatives. The fact that PSG fans view the country more favorably is quite telling regarding the power of sports fandom in helping with the nation's branding strategy. Fans' affinity for their favorite club seems to be a primary factor in how fans view an entity (in our case a small nation) that aligns with their club and supports it financially in ways that may make the club more successful. This is especially noteworthy given the broader substantial criticism against Qatar's involvement in sports as sportswashing. As our findings indicate, fans of PSG are mostly driven by their fandom and perceive the small nation favorably despite such criticisms.

It is important to recognize a key factor that may be relevant in this context. Qatar's involvement with PSG is, in general, considered positive for the club in the sense that it has actively pursued star players to join the club in an effort to win championships and trophies (especially the elusive Champions League trophy that PSG has not won, yet). A partnership between a country and a club where such attributions are not made, may make it harder for the country to generate positive perceptions among the fan base.

Our results were surprising in that there was not a negative reaction by rival fans as previous research has found in the context of brands sponsoring a rival (e.g., Angell et al., 2018; Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Grohs et al., 2015; Olson, 2018). This suggests there is an upside to such partnerships in that they can generate positive perceptions among the fan base of the club the nation partners with, but without much of a downside in alienating rival fans. Therefore, there would be more of a motivation for a nation, especially one that may be struggling with its image, to consider building its branding through sports partnerships in lieu of or in addition to other methods.

On a more specific level, in regard to the specific context of our study and our findings, the positive feelings about Qatar among PSG fans can be used for targeting purposes in regard to developing tourism and attracting new visitors from France, Qatar could mainly target soccer fans, especially PSG fans as they have the best perception of the country among the French population. It can do so through PSG friendly matches, training courses and meetings between fans and their idols. The players have already come to play in Qatar every year for one week during the winter break or in the summer. However, these training camps do not attract many fans. The country could better activate its partnership with PSG, by creating promotional offers for PSG supporters such as

one-off prices on airline tickets or hotels to attract them. For example, a PSG fan who buys a ticket for a PSG match could have an offer to buy a stay in Qatar at a very attractive price. Another possibility would be to invite PSG fans during the training courses of their team in Qatar, to show them around the country. A great experience that combines the country along with their favorite team will reinforce and increase their positive feelings toward Qatar. It will also increase the likelihood of them sharing the experience through social media and traditional word-of-mouth with others and, consequently, improve the country's image further and attract more new visitors.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

It is important to recognize the focus of this research was specifically on French fans' response to Qatar's involvement with a French team and, therefore, be cautious about generalizing the results to other countries and their involvement with sports teams. Further research with fans from other countries can provide additional insight in that respect.

It is also noteworthy that despite the substantial efforts of the Qatar ownership, PSG has still not been able to win the UEFA Champions League. Its most recent elimination (in March 2022 against Real Madrid) caused substantial frustration to its fans who subsequently booed some of the club's biggest stars (Grez, 2022; Hawkey, 2022). It remains to be seen whether, if these woes continue, at some point the disgruntled fans will turn their resentment toward the ownership and their attitudes toward Qatar could change. Therefore, even though our findings do not suggest so at the time of the data collection, there may be a risk for a country in partnering with a sports club, if the partnership does not bring the anticipated success to the club. Future research could examine this more closely in situations where this may happen.

Another important suggestion for future research in this area would be to conduct longitudinal studies where the researchers are better able to track the impact of a country's involvement in sports on perceptions of the country's image among fans.

Our study provides interesting insight, especially in terms of the absence of negative (pitchfork) effects that have been found in previous research. Thus, we hope it will motivate further research in this area especially in assessing potential differences in responses to nations vs. brands partnering with clubs, which would contribute to the field with both theoretical and managerial contributions.

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