



Delving Deeper Into the Conceptual Debate on Sportswashing: Institutional Narratives of Reputational Projection of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent decades, sport has become a strategic instrument within international politics, used by states to project national image, strengthen global reputation and enhance territorial positioning. At the same time, the concept of sportswashing has gained prominence in both academic and media debates to describe the use of sport as a reputational legitimization strategy in the face of political or social criticism. However, its widespread use has generated conceptual ambiguity and confusion with other sport-related strategies such as sports diplomacy and sports place branding. **Methodology:** This study adopts a quantitative approach based on digital content analysis of social media, examining 684 posts published in 2025 by institutional accounts related to the territorial promotion strategies of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Data were collected using the social media analytics tool Fanpage Karma and analyzed through three complementary dimensions: communication activity, digital engagement performance and lexical-discursive narrative analysis. **Results:** The findings reveal a clear asymmetry in the communication strategies of both countries. Rwanda displays a highly centralized strategy around the Visit Rwanda brand, where sport functions as a key instrument for international visibility and high levels of digital engagement. In contrast, the Democratic Republic of Congo presents a more fragmented communication strategy focused primarily on cultural and tourism promotion. **Discussion:** The results confirm the usefulness of the proposed political triangle of sport framework for interpreting these strategies, highlighting the predominance of sports place branding over sports diplomacy and sport for development narratives. Furthermore, the study argues that sportswashing can be understood as a critical interpretative outcome that may emerge across these strategies. **Conclusions:** The research contributes to clarifying the conceptual debate by proposing an integrative analytical framework that distinguishes legitimate territorial branding strategies from their potential reinterpretation as sportswashing in contexts of reputational controversy.

Keywords: sportswashing; sports diplomacy; sports place branding; soft power; place branding; public diplomacy; digital communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, sport has become a strategic public policy tool used by states to project their international image, strengthen their competitive positioning, and articulate narratives of national identity (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Murray & Pigman, 2014; Nye, 2004). The growing interconnection between sport, diplomacy, and territorial reputation has driven investment strategies in international sponsorships, event organization, and alliances with global sports stakeholders, framed within dynamics of soft power and nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Dentice, 2022; Ginesta & San Eugenio, 2013).

However, this expansion of sport as a political instrument has been accompanied by a critical debate surrounding the concept of sportswashing (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Fruh et al., 2022), widely used, especially in the media (Delaney, 2024), to describe situations in which state actors with democratic deficits or human rights controversies resort to sport as a mechanism for reputational legitimization (Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022). The growing dissemination of the term has generated conceptual ambiguity, raising a central question: at what point does a sports place branding or sports diplomacy strategy become interpreted as reputational whitewashing?

The cases of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo provide illustrative examples of this tension between international projection, political legitimacy, and geopolitical controversy (Ginesta, 2024). Between 2018 and 2025, Rwanda deployed an intensive international sponsorship strategy under the “Visit Rwanda” brand, establishing agreements with elite European clubs and American sports franchises as part

of its global positioning strategy (ESPN, 2025). Simultaneously, various international organizations denounced the Rwandan government's alleged support for the M23 armed group in eastern Congo, in a context marked by accusations of human rights violations and persistent regional tensions (Freedom House, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). From the Congolese perspective, this conflict is linked to structural problems of sovereignty, regional security, and the exploitation of natural resources, shaping a narrative that contrasts with the modernization discourse promoted by Rwanda's international strategy. In turn, the Congolese government itself has been criticized for weaknesses in governance and human rights, highlighting a two-way tension in the international narrative dispute (Amnistía Internacional, 2025; Reuters, 2025b).

This scenario raises a broader analytical problem: how to distinguish between the legitimate use of sport as a tool for place branding, sports diplomacy, and even social and community development, and its critical interpretation as sportswashing in contexts of reputational controversy. The answer cannot be based solely on normative judgments, but requires a conceptual framework that allows for differentiating these dynamics through systematic analytical criteria.

Thus, this paper uses the Rwanda–Democratic Republic of Congo case as an empirical context to address this theoretical problem. Within this framework, sportswashing is not conceived as an independent strategy, but rather as a cross-cutting critical interpretation that can emerge in relation to different forms of political instrumentalization of sport. Based on a review of the academic literature (Coalter, 2013; Dentice, 2022; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2013; Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Grix et al., 2023; Murray & Pigman, 2014) and an analysis of institutional and media narratives, an approach is proposed that allows distinguishing the strategic use of sport as a public policy for territorial branding, sports diplomacy, or social development from its possible interpretation as a mechanism for reputational legitimization (Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022).

In this context, the study has two objectives. First, to develop an integrative conceptual framework that situates sportswashing across the theoretical spheres of sports place branding, sports diplomacy, and sport for development, understanding it as an outcome rather than an autonomous strategy (Coalter, 2013; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Murray & Pigman, 2014). Second, to identify the discursive and narrative conditions that can foster the critical reinterpretation of certain official territorial projection strategies linked to sport as potential dynamics of sportswashing, using the digital communication strategies of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo on social media as case studies. The study does not measure the public perception of sportswashing, but rather the institutional narratives that can facilitate its critical reinterpretation in contexts of reputational controversy.

This work makes three main contributions. First, it offers a conceptualization of sportswashing as a critical analytical category (an evaluative interpretation) rather than as a public policy strategy. Second, it integrates three theoretical currents (territorial branding, sports diplomacy, and sport for development) into a unified triangular model that clarifies their distinct political logics and expected outcomes. Third, it proposes a set of analytical criteria (motivations, transparency, narrative, political context, and expected results) that facilitate comparative analysis and reduce conceptual confusion between *territorial branding strategies*, sports diplomacy, and accusations of sportswashing.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Politics and Sports: A Strategic Triad According to Current Literature

In contemporary international relations, sport has become a multifunctional instrument of political action, capable of operating simultaneously in the internal and external dimensions of states, regions, or cities (Dentice, 2022; Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Grix et al., 2023; Murray & Pigman, 2014). Beyond its recreational or competitive nature, sport functions as a symbolic vehicle for political communication, reputational building, and social articulation (Brannagan et al., 2025). From this perspective, sports are integrated into the dynamics of soft power, public diplomacy, development, and the formation of collective identities, as they enable places to project values, narratives, and/or worldviews to their target audiences (Entman, 1993; Nye, 2004).

In this regard, Murray and Pigman (2014) highlight that sport has become a relevant tool in contemporary diplomacy, as it facilitates interaction between state and non-state actors, generating channels of cultural and political communication that can influence the international perception of countries. Similarly, Dentice (2022) and Chadwick (2022) emphasize that the growing interconnection between sport, economics, and international politics has transformed sport into a strategic resource within geopolitical agendas, especially through the organization of mega-sporting events or investments in clubs and international competitions.

Within this framework, recent literature has analyzed how sport is incorporated into foreign policy strategies aimed at building international influence. Grix and Brannagan (2024) argue that sport can be understood as an instrument of sports diplomacy that allows states to achieve political, economic, and reputational objectives through the organization of mega-events, the sponsorship of competitions, or investment in elite clubs. In their analysis, the authors argue that concepts such as sportswashing and soft power should not be interpreted as independent strategies, but rather as outcomes derived from broader policies of sports diplomacy and foreign and security policy. From this perspective, sport acts as a means to influence international perceptions, generate global visibility, and strengthen the international standing of states. Along these same lines, Grix et al. (2023) point out that the phenomenon of sportswashing occurs within the context of a global sports system characterized by the interdependence of state actors, sports organizations, and international markets, which implies that sports investment strategies must be understood as part of broader political and economic processes.

In this analytical context, the term sportswashing has become popular to describe the strategic use of sport to improve or reshape the reputational image of certain political actors, especially when they face criticism related to human rights or governance (Fruh et al., 2022). According to Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2022), sportswashing involves using the visibility and popularity of sport to deflect attention from moral or political violations, redirecting the focus toward positive narratives associated with the sporting spectacle. However, more recent literature nuances this interpretation, pointing out that sports investments should not be analyzed solely as reputational cover-up strategies. For this reason, Grix and Brannagan (2024) argue that these actions can be part of more complex foreign policy strategies where sportswashing often constitutes an initial phase in a broader process of building international legitimacy that, once consolidated over the long term, should result in soft power. However, in their early stages these initiatives are often publicly interpreted as attempts at sportswashing, especially when they are developed under intense media pressure and international political debate.

A telling example of this trend is the acquisition of the English soccer club Newcastle United by the Saudi Arabian sovereign wealth fund PIF (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025; Satish et al., 2024). This move was interpreted by numerous media outlets and analysts as a paradigmatic case of sportswashing (Delaney, 2024), in which the sports investment was perceived as an attempt to improve the country's international

image. However, as Grix and Brannagan (2024) point out, these types of initiatives can also be part of broader strategies aimed at strengthening the state's international presence in the global sports system. In any case, transforming a country's international image is a complex and protracted process, as external perceptions and national stereotypes tend to be persistent and difficult to change (Anholt, 2011; Grix, 2013). Consequently, the relationship between sport and reputational projection cannot be understood as an automatic or immediate process, but as a phenomenon conditioned by multiple political, cultural and also communicative factors.

At this point, the work of Simon Anholt (2011) is particularly relevant. In analyzing the concept, references to the work on territorial branding led by Simon Anholt, considered one of the founders of the discipline, are especially interesting for explaining how states symbolically compete for reputation, visibility, and international influence (Anholt, 2011; Grix et al., 2023). According to Anholt (2011), a country's reputation is built through multiple dimensions (political, cultural, economic, and tourism-related) that contribute to shaping the territory's international image. In this sense, sport can function as a particularly effective resource within these territorial branding strategies, as it combines global media visibility, narrative capacity, and a strong emotional connection with audiences (Rein & Shields, 2007).

However, the literature review presents us with the challenge of integrating the territorial branding dimension more concretely into the current conceptual model of sportswashing, which is much more political in nature. In other words, although much of the scientific literature from Political Science or International Relations, primarily, implicitly recognizes the territorial and reputational dimension of sport, the theoretical framework developed by these authors focuses mainly on the relationship between sports diplomacy, sportswashing, and soft power, relegating the explicit integration of the territorial branding dimension to the background. This limitation has been indirectly pointed out by some recent works that warn that the academic debate on sportswashing has tended to adopt excessively normative approaches or those focused on the political dimension of the phenomenon, without fully incorporating perspectives from communication studies or place branding (Jacobsen, 2026; Kazakov, 2025), which can also help to have a much more holistic view of the phenomenon and place it in the sub-state logic.

In this respect, a conceptual gap can be identified in the literature. Although studies on sports diplomacy and sportswashing acknowledge the role of sport in the reputational projection of political organizations, there is still limited integration between these approaches and territorial branding theories. In other words, while Grix introduces the concept of place branding through a reference to Anholt, his conceptual framework on sportswashing does not fully develop this territorial dimension, leaving the intersection between sports diplomacy, media framing, and territorial branding strategies unexplored. This analytical gap opens a significant research opportunity, as it allows for an exploration of how sports investments, media coverage, and reputational narratives contribute to the strategic construction of territories' international image.

Therefore, building upon previous valuable contributions (Brannagan et al., 2025; Delaney, 2024; Fruh et al., 2022; Grix et al., 2023) and with the aim of systematizing these political uses of sport, this study proposes an integrative analytical model that articulates three interrelated strategic dimensions from three disciplinary fields: place branding, public diplomacy, and development and peace studies. In all three disciplines, sport can be considered a strategic asset, connecting lines of research and knowledge transfer, such as sports place branding, sports diplomacy, and sport for development. Thus, this model does not seek to describe independent categories, but rather to explain how sport functions as a comprehensive political platform capable of producing differentiated outcomes depending on the strategic objectives pursued.

Each component of the triad represents a specific political logic. First, sports place branding focuses on building territorial reputation and socio-symbolic competitiveness; sports diplomacy centers on international projection and shaping soft power; and sport for development pursues objectives of social cohesion and internal stability (Coalter, 2013; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Murray & Pigman, 2014). Although these approaches have traditionally been studied separately, the triangular model presented in Figure 1 allows us to understand their interrelation and their coordinated strategic use within contemporary public policies.

Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram of the Political Triad of Sports



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Based on a review of the existing literature, this conceptual framework will serve as the foundation upon which the concept of “sportswashing” will be overlaid; here, “sportswashing” is understood not as an additional component, but as a critical, multidisciplinary category that can operate across any of the three dimensions when sports are exploited in contexts of reputational disputes or political controversy. This perspective allows for a systematic analysis of the conditions under which sport transitions from being a legitimate tool of public policy to becoming an object of normative questioning.

2.2. Sports Place Branding: Competitiveness and Territorial Cohesion

Sports place branding is the strategy by which a country, city, or region uses sporting events, infrastructure, or sports organizations to strengthen its territorial brand and enhance its competitive identity. This vision is integrated into Rein and Shields' (2007) territorial branding theory. Anholt (2007) defines competitive identity as the sum of a place's reputation, governance, and perceived value; Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) emphasize that urban branding is a strategic assertion of a city's identity. Applied to sport, this involves managing a country's image through major events (Olympic Games, World Championships) or the success of national leagues (Fernández & Villar, 2022). Richelieu (2018) observes that historically, sport has been used for branding primarily in mega-sporting events, although there are few studies on the role of local teams in city branding.

The outcome of this aspect is territorial competitiveness: not only economic but also sociocultural. A strong sports brand can increase tourism, attract investors, and generate pride and a sense of belonging among residents (Fernández & Villar, 2022). For example, small cities have transformed post-industrial areas into sports ecosystems to reposition themselves (Dentice, 2022). Internally, sport contributes to cultural cohesion: a region's football identity consolidates collective narratives (Fernández & Villar, 2022).

Several components of sports place branding are key: the alliance between the local brand and the club brand (personalization of the city brand), the narrative of shared success, and international media exposure (Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018). Sport in branding building contributes to legacy narratives: it is projected that the social benefits (urban development, infrastructure) persist after the events (Moragas & Botella, 1995). In short, sports place branding responds to a planned strategy: it uses sporting events and assets to create symbolic capital for the place, with the political outcome of greater competitiveness in global markets and internal cohesion (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Richelieu, 2018).

2.3. Sports Diplomacy: Soft Power and International Projection

Sports diplomacy employs sport as a tool to enhance a country's international influence (Nye, 2004; Murray & Pigman, 2014). Consequently, the strengthening of soft power becomes the primary outcome of sports diplomacy. Nye (2004, pp. 5, 11) defined soft power as "the power of seduction that a state exerts over others" through cultural resources and attractive values. Sport, as a global spectacle, fits within this vision: it offers nations non-coercive channels of communication. Murray and Pigman (2014) point out that international sporting competition is an ideal channel for nations, regions, and cities to share their identities, achievements, and "brands" with the rest of the world. Within this framework, countries organize friendly matches, participate in multilateral sports organizations, or forge alliances with sports stars to gain credibility with global audiences.

Sports diplomacy should strengthen the country's international standing and improve its image abroad. The goal is not so much internal cohesion, but rather increasing soft power: to persuade and attract (Nye, 2004). It is a form of public diplomacy, within what Cull (2008) understands as cultural diplomacy, in which sporting exchanges, media visibility, and cooperation with non-state actors (clubs, international federations) serve to reinforce the foreign policy agenda. For example, participation in the Olympic Games provides a platform to showcase national values (inclusion, modernity) under an official national slogan (Murray & Pigman, 2014). Emerging countries have used sports and academic scholarships as a form of regional soft diplomacy (Pigman, 2010).

As Dentice (2022) points out, the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf have transformed elite sports into expressions of their international soft power. They have invested in teams and mega-events to improve their image in the face of global prejudice. However, this strategy is criticized when it is seen as an attempt to mask political problems (which links to sportswashing). In short, sports diplomacy seeks to increase state international influence through territorial branding, incorporating sport into formal and informal public diplomacy (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Dentice, 2022).

2.4. Sport for Development: Social Cohesion and Stability

The sport for development perspective emphasizes the internal objectives of inclusion and social stability through sport (Coalter, 2013). Similarly, Giulianotti (2011) conceptualizes the sport for development and peace sector as a global sphere of activity in which sport is intentionally used for social and development objectives, bringing together multiple actors and domains that seek to generate benefits beyond competitive sporting practice. Here, sport is not an end in itself, but a means to improve social indicators:

public health, education, gender equality, and peaceful coexistence. Organizations such as the UN have promoted sports programs for at-risk youth or for the integration of minorities. According to Giulianotti and Armstrong (2013), the sport, development, and peace sector grew significantly with the establishment of NGOs and policies dedicated to it, recognizing sport as a form of social capital.

The outcome of this approach lies in social cohesion and an improved quality of life within communities. Community football initiatives, recreational athletics, and local sporting events promote interpersonal relationships, reduce ethnic tensions, and empower vulnerable groups (Coalter, 2013). In African contexts, various programs have used sport as a tool for post-conflict reconciliation and violence prevention, shifting the diplomatic narrative toward frameworks of social development, education, and health. However, Coalter (2013) cautions that empirical evidence on these impacts is not always robust, although he identifies cumulative effects in terms of social capital building. In this vein, the “ripple effect” model proposed by Svensson (2017) emphasizes that the effects of sport for development are neither linear nor immediate, but rather spread progressively from the individual to the community and, eventually, to broader structural levels.

In short, sport for development is fundamentally linked to domestic social policy objectives: using sport to build community, not to promote it. Its political success is measured by indicators of integration and well-being rather than by medals or national branding.

2.5. Sportswashing: Critical Definition and Eurocentrism

The concept of sportswashing has rapidly expanded in contemporary media and academic debate, particularly in the analysis of the relationships between sport, political power, and international reputation (Fruh et al., 2022; Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Grix et al., 2023; Skey, 2022). However, despite its increasing use, the term continues to exhibit significant conceptual ambiguity, being employed as a normative label, a descriptive category, or a political accusation without a precise analytical definition (Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022). This lack of clarity has generated theoretical confusion, especially regarding its relationship with sports place branding strategies and sports diplomacy, while sport for development has remained relatively outside the conceptual debate.

From an analytical perspective, and based on the conceptual triangle previously defined in Figure 1 (sports place branding, sports diplomacy, and sport for development), this study understands sportswashing not as an autonomous political strategy, but as a critical interpretive category applied to certain sporting practices in contexts of reputational controversy. In this sense, sportswashing does not describe a public policy in itself, but rather a process of normative reinterpretation through which sports investments, events, or international partnerships are interpreted as attempts to deflect, soften, or normalize significant political criticism (Entman, 1993; Skey, 2022).

Fruh et al. (2022) identify the characteristic mechanisms of sportswashing as symbolic distraction, the minimization of conflicts, and reputational normalization through sports spectacle. These processes operate through narrative reconfiguration: sport generates positive visibility and global attention that can displace issues related to democratic deficits, armed conflicts, or human rights violations from the media spotlight. Within this framework, sportswashing functions primarily as a discursive and reputational phenomenon rather than as a structured sports policy.

The literature has also highlighted culturally oriented criticisms. Some authors argue that the label “sportswashing” has been applied with a Western bias, primarily attributed to non-European states, even though democratic powers have also historically used sport for geostrategic purposes (Giulianotti &

Armstrong, 2013). However, the critical emphasis tends to focus on contexts marked by institutional deficits, political conflicts, or human rights controversies (Dentice, 2022). Although the phenomenon has been particularly visible in non-Western cases, conceptually it can emerge in any context where sport is used to mitigate reputational tensions, whether for states or sub-state entities.

In the proposed framework, sportswashing is not the antithesis of sports place branding nor an autonomous political strategy, but a critical evaluative category that emerges as a contingent outcome when practices of sports diplomacy, sports place branding or sport for development are reinterpreted in contexts of reputational controversy, generating a gap between the projected sports narrative and the underlying political context (Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022).

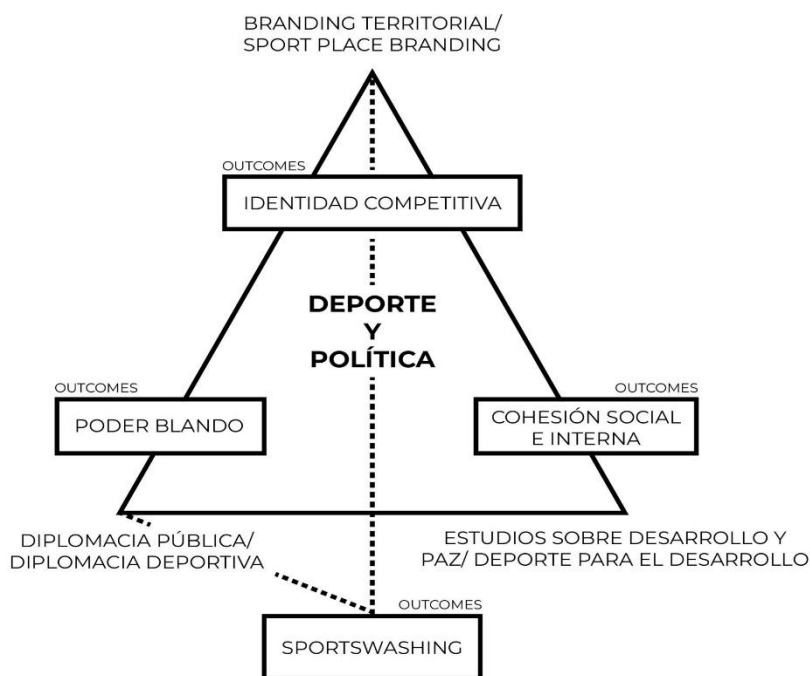
The literature identifies a set of conditions that favor the emergence of this critical interpretation. First, there is motivation and strategic coherence: while place branding and sports diplomacy pursue explicit objectives of territorial competitiveness, international projection, or social development, sportswashing is attributed to sporting activity when it appears disconnected from the political context or is perceived as an attempt to neutralize significant criticism (Dentice, 2022; Skey, 2022). Second, the political context, given that the term “sportswashing” tends to emerge in situations marked by conflict, institutional shortcomings, or international scrutiny, although conceptually it is not limited to undemocratic systems (Dentice, 2022; Fruh et al., 2022).

Third, the narrative and communicative dimension is central. From the perspective of framing theory, sport can act as a mechanism for symbolic reframing, shifting public attention from structural problems toward positive narratives associated with the sporting spectacle (Entman, 1993; Skey, 2022). Fourth, the degree of transparency influences its interpretation: place branding strategies are often presented as explicit policies for territorial promotion, while the accusation of sportswashing emerges when opacity or dissonance is perceived between discourse and political context (Dentice, 2022; Fruh et al., 2022). Finally, the expected outcome constitutes a key differentiating element: while branding, diplomacy, or development strategies seek social, territorial, or relational benefits, sportswashing is primarily interpreted as an attempt at external reputational legitimation through symbolic distraction (Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022).

From this perspective, sportswashing does not describe a specific sports policy, but an evaluative analytical category that emerges when there is a significant gap between the projected sports narrative and the underlying political context, allowing a systematic analysis of when sport functions as a legitimate tool of public policy and when its instrumentalization generates reputational questions (Entman, 1993; Fruh et al., 2022; Skey, 2022).

Within this framework, the proposed model projects a political triangle of sport, in which each vertex responds to distinct but interconnected logics: sports diplomacy is oriented towards international projection and the reinforcement of soft power; sports place branding focuses on building competitive identity and territorial positioning; and sport for development responds to internal dynamics of social cohesion and inclusion. Sport thus acts as a cross-cutting conduit for communication, influence, and persuasion, while sportswashing emerges as a possible outcome derived from these dynamics when conditions of reputational controversy arise.

Figure 2. Summary of the Proposed Conceptual Model, in Which Sport Acts as a General Political Channel and Sportswashing Is Presented as a Possible Outcome Derived from the Dynamics of the Triad



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In this model (see Figure 2), sportswashing does not constitute an autonomous political strategy, but a contingent outcome that emerges when processes of sports diplomacy, sports place branding or sport for development are critically reinterpreted in contexts of reputational controversy, generating a gap between the projected sports narrative and the underlying political context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative methodological approach based on digital content analysis applied to social media, with the aim of examining the territorial communication strategies related to sport developed by Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo within the context of their international promotion policies. Content analysis is a widely used methodology in studies of digital communication, territorial branding, and public diplomacy, as it allows for the systematic and replicable examination of large volumes of communicative content disseminated on digital platforms (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

In the field of place branding and sports diplomacy, social media has become a strategic channel for constructing territorial narratives and projecting the international image of states (Anholt, 2011; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). In particular, tourism promotion and/or sports diplomacy campaigns use these platforms to disseminate audiovisual content, establish narrative frameworks, and generate interaction with international audiences (Ginesta & San Eugenio, 2013; Richelieu, 2018). From this perspective, the systematic analysis of social media posts allows for the identification of both the discursive strategies and the visual and narrative elements used by institutional actors in their territorial positioning policies.

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

The empirical basis of the study consists of $n = 684$ social media posts, compiled in a structured database that includes information on the content, links to associated visual material, and user-generated interaction metrics. The data were obtained using the digital analytics tool Fanpage Karma, a professional platform used for social media performance analysis. This tool allows for the systematic extraction of indicators related to communicative activity, post reach, and user engagement. The use of social analytics tools has become a standard practice in academic research on digital communication and social media marketing, as it facilitates the collection and systematization of large volumes of data from social platforms (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

The analyzed sample includes posts from institutional and tourism profiles linked to the territorial promotion of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo from January 1, 2025, to December 31, 2025. These accounts represent the main digital channels used by both countries to disseminate narratives of tourism promotion, international cooperation, and territorial positioning. The selected accounts belong to four main social media platforms: Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, currently considered the most relevant spaces for the strategic communication of tourism organizations and territorial brands (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Xiang et al., 2017). Table 1 lists the institutional accounts included in the analysis.

Table 1. *Official Accounts Analyzed on Social Networks*

Country	Institution / Brand	Platform	Number of Followers	Account
Rwanda	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	151,000	https://www.instagram.com/visitrwanda_now
Rwanda	Visit Rwanda	Facebook	127,000	https://www.facebook.com/visitrwandanow
Rwanda	Visit Rwanda	YouTube	15,500	https://www.youtube.com/@VisitRwanda
Democratic Republic of Congo	Ministry of Tourism DR CONGO	Instagram	6,628	https://www.instagram.com/mintourismerdc/
Democratic Republic of Congo	Office National du Tourisme DR CONGO	Instagram	2,477	https://www.instagram.com/officenationaltourisme_rdcongo
Democratic Republic of Congo	Tourismerdc	TikTok	2,536	https://www.tiktok.com/@tourismerdc
Democratic Republic of Congo	National Tourism Office RDC	Facebook	25,000	https://www.facebook.com/officetourismerdc
Democratic Republic of Congo	Ministry of Tourism DR CONGO	Facebook	36,000	https://www.facebook.com/MinistereduTourismeRdc/
Democratic Republic of Congo	DR CONGO Tourism	YouTube	10,100	https://www.youtube.com/@drctourism
Democratic Republic of Congo	Tourism institutional channel	YouTube	71	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPe78SNqDcA7gd09IxKo-GQ

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In total, the analysis includes ten institutional accounts belonging to tourism organizations and territorial brands in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the case of Rwanda, digital communication is centrally structured around the Visit Rwanda country brand, whose official profiles on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube were included in the study. TikTok was not included in the analysis for Rwanda

due to the lack of an active official Visit Rwanda account during the data collection period. Conversely, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, tourism communication is distributed among various institutions, such as the Ministry of Tourism, the National Tourism Office, and several institutional channels associated with tourism promotion. For this reason, several additional accounts belonging to these entities were included to capture the diversity of actors involved in the digital promotion of the destination. This difference means that the comparison is not entirely symmetrical, but rather contrasts a centralized territorial brand in the Rwandan case with a more fragmented institutional architecture in the Congolese case.

The inclusion of multiple platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube) allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the digital communication strategies used to promote tourism and project narratives linked to sports and territorial development. These platforms were selected due to their relevance in disseminating visual and audiovisual content, which is especially important in contemporary tourism promotion and territorial branding strategies.

The accounts were selected through a systematic search of the institutions' official websites and verification of their institutional status, excluding personal profiles, unverified accounts, or profiles not directly linked to public tourism promotion agencies. Although some of the analyzed institutions maintain active profiles on Twitter, this platform was not included in the analysis due to technical limitations in extracting metrics through the Fanpage Karma analysis tool during the data collection period, which prevented obtaining homogeneous indicators comparable with the other platforms analyzed.

3.2. Analysis Strategy

The empirical analysis was structured in three complementary analytical dimensions that allow for an integrated examination of communicative activity, digital performance, and discursive narratives present in the territorial promotion strategies developed by Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo on social networks.

This approach combines quantitative content analysis, digital *engagement analysis*, and lexical-discursive analysis—methodologies widely used in digital communication studies, territorial marketing, and social media analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Combining these approaches allows for the examination not only of the volume of communicative activity but also of the effectiveness of the disseminated content and the narrative frameworks that structure institutional communication.

3.3. Analysis of Communication Activity on Social Media

In the first phase, the communication activity of institutional accounts on social media was analyzed to identify the intensity of use of each platform and the differences between the two countries studied. The study examined the total number of posts generated by each institutional account, as well as their distribution across different digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube). This type of indicator allows for the evaluation of organizations' digital presence and the strategic importance of each social network within their communication strategy (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

The comparative analysis of communication activity is a common practice in studies on tourism communication and *place branding*, as it allows for the identification of differences in the intensity and orientation of digital strategies deployed by different regions (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Xiang et al., 2017). In this case, measuring the volume of publications allows for the evaluation of the level of development of each country's digital strategy and the detection of potential asymmetries in the production of institutional content.

3.4. Analysis of Communication Performance: Digital Engagement

In a second phase, the communicative performance of the posts was analyzed, using the engagement rate generated by each piece of content as the primary indicator. Engagement metrics are among the most widely used indicators in the academic literature on digital communication and social media marketing, as they allow for the evaluation of the level of response and engagement generated by users in response to specific content (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). In this study, the engagement rate was calculated using the main participation metrics available on each platform ("likes," comments, shares/retweets, and other forms of interaction specific to each social network) in relation to the size of each profile's digital community. Specifically, interactions recorded on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok were considered, adapting the metrics to the functionalities of each platform (e.g., likes, comments, shares, or retweets). Thus, the engagement rate was estimated using the following formula:

Engagement rate = (Total interactions / Number of followers) × 100.

The total number of interactions includes the sum of likes, comments, shares, and retweets, as well as other engagement actions available on each social network. However, these indicators should be interpreted with caution, as the dynamics of interaction, algorithmic visibility, and user participation differ across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Consequently, the engagement metrics obtained allow for the identification of general trends in communication performance, but they do not constitute equivalent or absolutely comparable measures across digital platforms.

This study identified publications that registered interaction rates significantly higher than the average of the dataset, with the aim of detecting communication patterns associated with high-impact digital content. This analysis allows us to examine which types of messages, narratives, or visual resources generate higher levels of engagement among audiences, providing relevant information on the communicative effectiveness of territorial promotion strategies disseminated on social media.

3.5. Lexical and Narrative Analysis of the Content

In a third phase, a lexical-discursive analysis of the textual content of the publications was carried out, with the aim of identifying the most used words, concepts and narratives in the digital communication of both countries.

Lexical analysis, a technique widely used in the scientific field of digital communication, territorial marketing and discourse analysis, allows the detection of semantic patterns and dominant narrative frameworks in large textual corpora (Cristòfol et al., 2025), and, from the point of view of place branding, this type of analysis is especially interesting to examine how territories construct identity narratives aimed at projecting a specific image towards international audiences (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Anholt, 2011).

This study identified the most frequently used words and expressions in the analyzed publications, allowing for the detection of the discursive elements that structure institutional communication. This procedure facilitates the identification of narratives related to tourism promotion, national identity, territorial development, and international cooperation.

Furthermore, the lexical analysis was complemented by thematic coding of the content, based on the previously described system of categories (narrative frame, target audience, territorial promise, elements of credibility, communicative tone, visual content, and calls to action). The combination of lexical analysis and thematic coding allows for an integrated examination of both the discursive and strategic dimensions

of institutional digital communication. The reliability of the thematic coding was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding satisfactory values for the analyzed variables, and was further refined by resolving discrepancies through consensus.

3.6. Analytical Integration with the Conceptual Model

Finally, the results obtained in the previous phases were interpreted using the conceptual framework proposed in this study, based on the political triangle of sport presented in this article, which comprises three analytical dimensions: Sports place branding, Sports diplomacy, and Sport for development (Figures 1 and 2). This approach allows for the analysis of how the communication strategies identified on social media relate to the different political logics surrounding the use of sport in the international projection of states, as well as to the contemporary academic debate on the phenomenon of sportswashing (Fruh et al., 2022; Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Grix et al., 2023; Skey, 2022). Thus, the empirical analysis is not limited to describing communication patterns on social media, but rather allows these strategies to be situated within theoretical frameworks that explain the political instrumentalization of sports in the construction of a public image.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Communicative Activity on Social Networks

The analysis of communication activity reveals significant differences in the intensity and structure of the digital presence of the analyzed institutional actors from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In total, the analyzed corpus comprises 684 social media posts from institutional profiles linked to the tourism and territorial promotion of these two Great Lakes region countries during 2025. The results show a clear asymmetry in digital content production between the two cases: while Rwanda concentrates most of its communicative activity through the Visit Rwanda territorial brand, Congolese institutions present a more fragmented strategy, distributed across multiple institutional accounts. This difference is particularly relevant in the context of the study, as the Visit Rwanda brand has articulated its international territorial positioning strategy through global sports alliances and sponsorships linked to professional football, making sport a central element of its international promotional narrative.

The Visit Rwanda account has 424 posts, representing approximately 62% of the total content analyzed, establishing itself as the leading communicator in the digital ecosystem studied. This dominance reflects the centralization of Rwanda's digital communication strategy around a single country brand that uses sports as a tool for global visibility and reputational projection. In contrast, the Congolese institutions analyzed have significantly lower publication volumes, distributed among various entities such as the Ministry of Tourism and the National Tourism Office, suggesting a less strategic approach to using sports as a tool for international positioning.

From the perspective of the platforms used, Facebook and Instagram account for the majority of communication activity, with 330 and 305 posts respectively, while YouTube shows significantly less activity (43 posts) and TikTok appears as a still-emerging platform in the institutional strategy, with only 6 posts recorded in the entire sample. This distribution, reflected in Table 2, indicates that communication strategies prioritize visual platforms with strong narrative capacity and international reach. These platforms are particularly relevant for disseminating sports-related content (such as events, sports infrastructure, or partnerships with clubs and competitions) that function as symbolic tools for projecting modernity, international openness, and organizational capacity within contemporary territorial branding strategies. However, these differences should be interpreted considering the sample asymmetry described above.

Table 2. *Distribution of Publications Based on the Institutional Profile and Social Network*

	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	YouTube	Total	Percentage Total
DR CONGO Tourism				21	21	3.07%
Ministry of Tourism of the DR Congo	52				52	7.60%
Ministry of Tourism DR CONGO		62			62	9.06%
National Tourism Office DR Congo	67				67	9.80%
DR Congo: The Heart of Africa		52			52	7.60%
tourismerdc			6		6	0.88%
Visit Rwanda	211	191		22	424	61.99%
Total	330	305	6	43	684	100%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Taken together, these results reflect the existence of two distinct models of digital presence. On the one hand, Rwanda employs a highly centralized and consistent strategy centered around the Visit Rwanda brand, which accounts for the majority of communication activity and social media impact, reaching approximately 61.99% of all analyzed posts. On the other hand, the Democratic Republic of Congo presents a more dispersed communication structure among various institutional entities, whose profiles show significantly lower levels of participation, with individual percentages ranging from 0.88% to 9.80% of all analyzed posts.

4.2. Narrative and Strategic Structure of Digital Communication

With the aim of analyzing the characteristics of institutional communication on social networks, the content of the publications was examined from seven analytical dimensions: narrative framework, target audience, territorial promise, elements of credibility (proof points), communicative tone, visual resources, and calls to action. This approach allows us to identify how the analyzed institutions articulate their digital narrative to project an international image of the territory, paying special attention to the role that sport plays as a symbolic resource within contemporary strategies for territorial promotion and public diplomacy. The analysis reveals several relevant patterns in the narrative structure of the analyzed digital communication.

First, the predominant narrative framework is tourism, present in 347 publications (50.7%), confirming the central role of tourism promotion within the territorial communication strategies of both countries. However, this framework is complemented by other narratives that contribute to reinforcing the construction of a positive international image. The second most frequent framework corresponds to national pride, with 198 publications (28.9%), followed by content associated with culture (90 publications; 13.2%) and investment (46 publications; 6.7%). Explicit references to international diplomacy appear in only 3 publications (0.4%), indicating a marginal presence of this narrative in the analyzed corpus. Nevertheless, some of these international visibility strategies are articulated indirectly through sports, especially through sports alliances and sponsorships that function as instruments of global projection.

Regarding target audiences, the results show that institutional communication is primarily geared towards international tourists, identified in 439 publications (64.2%), confirming the external focus of the digital communication strategies analyzed. Domestic audiences appear in 207 publications (30.3%), while content aimed at international investors (31 publications; 4.5%) or the diaspora (7 publications; 1.0%) has a considerably smaller presence. This international approach aligns with territorial positioning strategies that

use sport as a tool for global visibility and attracting international audiences.

From a territorial positioning perspective, the promise of modernity is the dominant attribute in the institutional narrative, present in 569 publications (83.2%). This promise is articulated through references to infrastructure development, economic modernization, and the territory's international projection—elements that are also often associated with the capacity to organize or participate in sporting events and international alliances. The dimension of authenticity appears in 108 publications (15.8%), generally linked to cultural or natural elements of the destination, while the dimension of security has a clearly marginal presence with 7 identified cases (1.0%).

The analysis of the proof points reveals that publications frequently use data or figures, present in 590 publications (86.3%), as a mechanism for legitimizing institutional discourse. References to sports clubs or institutions are also identified in 72 publications (10.5%), demonstrating the use of sport as a symbolic element within territorial promotion strategies. These references are often associated with sponsorship agreements, sports collaborations, or mentions of international competitions, reinforcing the territory's global visibility through sport.

Regarding the communicative tone, a clear predominance of the institutional tone is observed, present in 547 publications (80.0%), compared to the aspirational tone, identified in 137 publications (20.0%). This predominance reflects the official nature of the analyzed accounts, although the presence of aspirational content indicates the incorporation of strategies typical of tourism and sports marketing to reinforce the destination's appeal.

Analysis of visual resources shows that infrastructure is the predominant visual element, appearing in 406 publications (59.4%), followed by images related to nature (194 publications; 28.4%). Representations of sports appear in 69 publications (10.1%), highlighting the role of sports facilities, events, and collaborations with sports organizations as visual resources used to project modernity, dynamism, and international openness. Conversely, images focused on people are identified in only 15 publications (2.2%).

Finally, the analysis of calls to action (CTAs) confirms the tourism-oriented nature of the communication analyzed. Invitations to visit the destination appear in 456 publications (66.7%), followed by references to events (221 publications; 32.3%). Although many of these calls to action are directly linked to tourism promotion, in some cases the events mentioned are related to sporting activities or institutional collaborations that contribute to strengthening the region's international visibility.

Table 3. Narrative and Strategic Structure of Digital Communication on Social Networks

		DR CONGO Tourism	Ministry of Tourism of the DR Congo	Ministry of Tourism DR CONGO	National Tourism Office DR Congo	DR Congo Heart of Africa	tourismerdc	Visit Rwanda	Total sum
Frame	Culture	10	5	12	13	3		47	90
	Diplomacy							3	3
	Investment	3	7	7	11	9	1	8	46
	National pride	8	20	24	24	23	2	97	198
	Tourism		20	19	19	17	3	269	347
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
Audience	Diaspora	7							7
	Domestic	11	36	43	34	21	4	58	207
	Investor	2	4	5	8	7	1	4	31
	Tourist	1	12	14	25	24	1	362	439
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
Promise	Authenticity	7	19	16	15	15	2	34	108
	Modernity	11	32	45	52	37	4	388	569
	Security	3	1	1				2	7
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
Proof points	Figures	13	50	58	66	52	5	346	590
	Clubs		2	3	1		1	65	72
	Awards	8		1				13	22
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
Tone	Aspirational	11		1				125	137
	Institutional	10	52	61	67	52	6	299	547
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
	People		1					14	15
	Infrastructure	10	42	55	55	42	5	197	406
	Nature	11	9	7	11	9	1	146	194
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684
CTA	Event	11	36	45	41	27	5	56	221
	Book		1	1					2
	Follow		2	1				2	5
	Visit	10	13	15	26	25	1	366	456
	Total sum	21	52	62	67	52	6	424	684

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The synthesis of these dimensions reveals a communication strategy strongly oriented toward international tourism promotion, in which narratives of modernity, territorial development, and natural appeal occupy a clearly predominant position. In this context, references to sport appear with a more limited presence within the analyzed corpus, functioning primarily as a complementary symbolic resource within the territory's international positioning strategies. Although it does not constitute the central focus of the institutional discourse, sport is strategically integrated into certain publications as an element of global visibility, reinforcing narratives associated with modernization, international projection, and institutional legitimacy.

4.3. Publications With the Highest Engagement Rate in Both Cases Under Study

The analysis of communicative performance made it possible to identify the five publications that registered the highest levels of interaction, both from users of the analyzed profiles from Rwanda and from those from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which allows for a comparison of the interaction dynamics generated by the official communication strategies of both countries.

In the case of Rwanda, the five posts with the highest engagement rates belong to the Visit Rwanda Instagram account and are clearly linked to international sports partnerships and collaborations with professional football clubs and figures. The post with the highest engagement rate reached 50.67% (Figure 3), followed by another post related to the Kwigizira event and the participation of international football figures, which generated 44.8% interaction (Figure 4). Other notable content included references to clubs such as Arsenal, PSG, and Atlético de Madrid, as well as sponsorship announcements linked to North American sports leagues like the NBA and NFL. These results demonstrate that content associated with international professional sports generates particularly high levels of interaction, reinforcing the role of sports as a global visibility tool within the Visit Rwanda territorial brand's digital strategy.

Figure 3. *Post With the Highest Level of Engagement from the Rwanda Case*



Source: Visit Rwanda official Instagram (@visitrwanda_now) <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLjyYFNC52a/>

Figure 4. Second Post with the Highest Level of Engagement from the Rwanda Case



Source: Visit Rwanda official Instagram (@visitrwanda_now)
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DOQ5MpWARvh/>

In contrast, in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the posts with the highest interaction rates are of a different nature. Although significant levels of engagement were identified (notably a post from the National Tourism Office with a rate of 20.26%), the most interactive content was primarily linked to cultural events and festivals, such as the World Festival of Music and Tourism (FMMT2025), or to the promotion of the country's natural and heritage resources. The remaining posts with high interaction rates ranged between 5.69% and 7.98%, reflecting a more moderate capacity for digital mobilization compared to the sports content associated with Rwanda's communication strategy.

Table 4. Top 5 Publications from Each Country with the Highest Engagement Rate in the Analyzed Corpus

Country	Date	Copy of post	Profile	Social Network	Post interaction rate
Rwanda	June 15, 2025	Putting in the work in Los Angeles ?????? Visit Rwanda joins psg x atleticodeMadrid as they prepare to compete against the best football clubs in the world ⚽ ?? #psg #atleti #visitrwanda	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	50.67%
	September 6, 2025	?? Celebrating #Kwitalizina20 with our #VisitRwanda partners A big thank you to football legends Javier Pastore of psg , Luis García of atleticodeMadrid, Bacary Sagna, and Mathieu Flamini of Arsenal for joining us at the 20th kwitalizina Gorilla Naming ceremony at the scenic foothills of volcanoespark ??.	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	44.80%
	June 18, 2025	Rwanda or NOT Rwanda ? ????	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	17.42%
	January 21, 2025	?? "Rwanda is a beautiful place, warm and the people are very welcoming." mutesi_jolly shares why Arsenal fans and the world should visitrwanda_now and what her favourite place to go is.	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	16.66%
	September 29, 2025	From Kigali to LA! #VisitRwanda is now the official sponsor of the laclippers and rams, the first African tourism brand in both the NBA y NFL. #VisitRwanda #RwandaInLA #NBA #NFL	Visit Rwanda	Instagram	10.89%
DR Congo	November 24, 2025	#Kinshasa #rdc #museum #mobutu #story	National Tourism Office DR Congo	Facebook	20.26%
	June 15, 2025	J-30 : Le Festival Mondial de la Musique et du Tourisme arrive ! ?? Kinshasa, Centre Culturel des Pays d'Afrique Centrale. ?? 16-18 Juillet 2025. Thème : "La route de la Rumba". La Rumba congolaise, inscrite au patrimoine immatériel de l'UNESCO, est une véritable passerelle entre l'Afrique, les Amériques et le monde. Le #FMMT2025 met à l'honneur la musique comme moteur de tourisme, d'identité et de développement inclusif. Préparez-vous à 3 jours de sons, de culture, de paix et de célébration du soft power congolais et de notre hospitalité légendaire. YAMBI, Boyeyi elamu ! (Bienvenue !)	Ministry of Tourism of the DR Congo	Facebook	7.98%

		#FMMT2025 #RDC #Kinshasa #LaRoutedeLaRumba #Rumba #UNESCO #SoftPower #PaixenRdc #Congolaise			
July 17, 2025	Participez aux panels du #FMMT2025 ?? Le 17 juillet 2025 ?? Centre Culturel et des Arts d’Afrique Centrale – Kinshasa La DR CONGO, Coeur de l’Afrique, vous ouvre un espace d’échanges enrichissants avec des experts de la musique, du tourisme et de la culture. Un rendez-vous incontournable pour réfléchir ensemble au rôle du soft power, à la paix, et à la valorisation de notre patrimoine. ?? +243 997 324 575 ?? +243 978 825 400 ???? Ministère du Tourisme République Démocratique du Congo #FMMT2025 #RDC #Tourisme #Culture #Musique #SoftPower #Kinshasa #MinistèreDuTourisme	Ministry of Tourism from the DR Congo	Facebook	7.67%	
July 18, 2025	?? Le 16 juillet 2025, #Kinshasa a accueilli l’ouverture du Festival Mondial de la Musique et du Tourisme au Centre Culturel et Artistique des pays d’Afrique Centrale. Dans une ambiance empreinte de ferveur et de créativité, l’événement a rassemblé artistes, institutions, professionnels du secteur et passionnés venus du monde entier. Au cœur de cette première journée : des interventions marquantes, une participation citoyenne massive et une performance musicale portée par la Rumba, patrimoine culturel mondial. À travers ce festival, la #RDC affirme son ambition : faire rayonner sa culture et son potentiel touristique comme leviers de paix, d’unité et de développement. — — — On July 16, 2025, Kinshasa hosted the official opening of the World Festival of Music and Tourism at the Central Africa Cultural Center. In a vibrant and creative atmosphere, the event brought together artists, institutions, tourism professionals, and enthusiasts from across the globe. The first day was marked by impactful speeches, strong public engagement, and a symbolic musical performance centered on Rumba — a recognized element of global cultural heritage. Through this festival, the Democratic Republic of Congo sets a clear vision: to showcase its culture and tourism as drivers of peace, unity, and sustainable	Ministry of Tourism of the DR Congo	Facebook	6.96%	

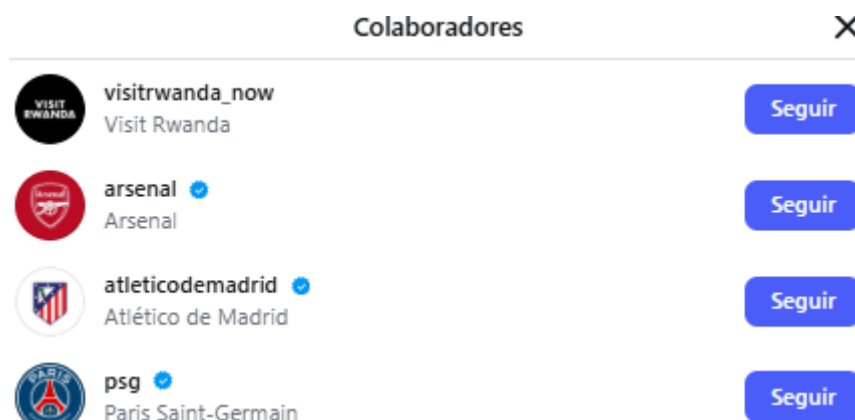
		development. #FMMT2025 #RDC #Tourism #Culture #SoftPower #Kinshasa			
	January 23, 2025	Explorez le Kongo-Central [LE PARC MARIN DES MANGROVES] Classé réserve de #Biosphère, le Parc Marin des #mangroves s'étend sur 76 000 hectares à l'embouchure du fleuve Congo. Ce sanctuaire écologique abrite une biodiversité exceptionnelle, notamment : - La tortue olivâtre (<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>, Vulnérable), - La tortue luth (<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>, Vulnérable), - La tortue verte (<i>Chelonia mydas</i>, En Danger). Le Parc Marin des Mangroves est une destination incontournable pour les amateurs d'écotourisme et de découvertes naturelles. #ExplorezLaRdc #KongoCentral #Magroves #RDC #tourisme #tourismerdc #africa #ministeredutourismerdc #TourismeRDCongo	Ministry of Tourism of the DR Congo	Facebook	5.69%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Taken together, these results suggest that, within the studied corpus, sports content associated with internationally renowned clubs, competitions, or sports figures acts as a powerful catalyst for interaction in the digital environment. While Rwanda explicitly integrates sport into its territorial communication strategy, generating particularly high levels of engagement, the Democratic Republic of Congo maintains a digital narrative more oriented toward cultural and tourism promotion, where sport plays a less central role in building its digital presence.

Furthermore, the digital strategy developed by Visit Rwanda shows signs of a high degree of professionalism in the use of social media platform tools. As shown in Figure 5, some posts are shared using Instagram's collaborative posting feature, allowing the same content to appear simultaneously on the profiles of different stakeholders. In the case analyzed, posts generated from Visit Rwanda's official account are shared jointly with the official profiles of top-tier international sports clubs and organizations, such as Arsenal FC, Atlético de Madrid, and Paris Saint-Germain FC. This type of action significantly expands the potential reach of the content by making it visible within the digital communities of these clubs, which boast global audiences of millions of followers.

Figure 5. Contributor Profiles in the Second Publication with the Highest Level of Engagement of the Rwanda Case



Source: Second Post With the Highest Number of Interactions in the Rwanda Case (Figure 4)
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DOQ5MpWArvh/>

4.4. Lexical Analysis of the Most Used Words in Digital Communication

With the aim of identifying the dominant semantic cores of the analyzed institutional communication, a lexical analysis of the text corpus associated with the publications was conducted. This procedure allows for the examination of the frequency of recurring words and expressions in the content disseminated on social media, providing a complementary approach to the categorical analysis presented previously. The results show that the digital narratives are structured primarily around three main semantic axes: territorial branding, tourism promotion, and international visibility through events.

First, terms linked to the country brand and territorial identification stand out, including “Rwanda,” “VisitRwanda,” “Kigali,” “DRC,” and “Congo.” The high prevalence of these terms reflects the centrality of *place branding* strategies in the analyzed institutional communication, aimed at strengthening the territory's international visibility and consolidating the brand identity of both countries within the digital ecosystem.

Secondly, the analysis reveals a significant presence of references to international events, such as “Kigali2025,” “Kwitalzina20,” and “GoAfrica.” These terms reflect the role that international events play as instruments of external projection and global positioning within territorial communication strategies. In the case of Rwanda, some of these events are directly or indirectly linked to the sporting sector or to public diplomacy initiatives associated with sport.

A third relevant semantic group relates to the narrative construction of the tourist destination, including terms such as “wildlife,” “nature,” “eco-luxury,” “culture,” and “heritage.” These expressions reinforce the projection of an image of the territory based on the combination of nature, cultural authenticity, and distinctive tourist experiences.

Figure 6 presents a visualization of the lexical analysis using a word cloud, in which the size of each term reflects its relative frequency of occurrence within the analyzed text corpus. As can be seen, terms associated with the territorial brand and major international events occupy a predominant position in the semantic structure of the institutional discourse.

5.1. Sports Place Branding: Sports as a Catalyst for Country Branding

The most evident pattern in the results relates to the sports place branding dimension, understood as the strategic use of sport to strengthen a territory's competitive identity (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Richelieu, 2018). The strong focus of communication activity on the Visit Rwanda brand, along with the coherence between territorial promise, aspirational tone, visual resources, and calls to action identified in Table 3, suggests a highly structured international positioning strategy. This finding is especially relevant when connected to Anholt's (2007, 2011) concept of competitive identity, according to which a territory's reputation depends not only on one-off promotions but also on its ability to project a stable, recognizable, and cumulative narrative over time.

In this sense, the predominant narrative in the analyzed publications combines territorial modernization, international tourism, global events, and international visibility, visually reinforced by images of infrastructure and nature. This convergence between narrative, visual representation, and call to action aligns with the logic of territorial branding described by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006), who argue that building a place brand requires coherence between identity, communication, and projected experience. Similarly, it fits with the vision of Rein and Shields (2007), for whom promoting a place is not simply about showcasing isolated attributes, but about articulating a competitive territorial identity capable of being recognized and differentiated by external audiences.

Furthermore, the role of sport within this narrative does not appear as an accessory element, but rather as a symbolic asset of modernity, prestige, and transnational projection. The results show that the vast majority of visual references to sports and partnerships with international clubs are concentrated in Rwanda, reinforcing the idea that sports serve as a catalyst for place branding here. This pattern coincides with the arguments of Richelieu (2018), as well as Ginesta and San Eugenio (2013), who point out that sport constitutes a particularly effective instrument of territorial branding due to its capacity to generate global media exposure, positive emotional associations, and frameworks of international legitimacy. It also aligns with Moragas and Botella's (1995) idea of legacy narratives, in which sporting events and assets are not limited to spectacle, but rather project modernization, urban development, and organizational capacity.

From this perspective, the Rwandan case appears to demonstrate a particularly robust activation of the aspect linked to territorial branding through sport: sport is not merely content, but rather part of a broader communication strategy aimed at making the territory a recognizable, modern, and competitive brand. In contrast, the communication fragmentation observed in the Democratic Republic of Congo suggests greater difficulties in consolidating this same cumulative effect. This is relevant because the literature on territorial branding emphasizes that institutional dispersion and a lack of narrative coherence weaken a territory's capacity to build a solid reputational identity (Anholt, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006).

5.2. Sports as a Mechanism of Implicit Public Diplomacy

The second dimension of the conceptual model—which relates to sports diplomacy—is reflected in the results in a less explicit way, but is nonetheless relevant. Although the framework of international diplomacy has a marginal presence in strictly discursive terms, the results suggest that sport functions as a mechanism of implicit public diplomacy, in line with the arguments of Murray and Pigman (2014). According to these authors, sport allows states to generate symbolic interaction with external audiences, reinforce the country's international projection, and articulate forms of influence that operate more through attraction than coercion.

In this regard, the predominant focus on international audiences, the central role of events with media potential, and partnerships with international clubs are consistent with the idea that sports serve as a tool for generating soft power, as defined by Nye (2004). It is not simply a matter of promoting tourism, but of building a favorable image of the country through symbolic and cultural resources capable of generating emotional connection, recognition, and global visibility. This interpretation is reinforced by engagement results, where the posts with the highest interaction are linked precisely to sporting milestones, international events, and collaborations of high symbolic value.

In this regard, it is particularly useful to consult Grix and Brannagan (2024), who argue that sports investments should be understood as part of broader foreign policy and security strategies, and that phenomena such as soft power or sportswashing are not standalone strategies, but rather possible outcomes of those policies. From this perspective, sports diplomacy does not need to be explicitly labeled as such to function as such. It can manifest itself implicitly, as in this study, through a combination of events, alliances, international projection, and the construction of an attractive territorial image. Consequently, the limited presence of the diplomatic framework does not invalidate the significance of sports diplomacy but rather confirms that it can be organized in a functional rather than a declarative manner.

5.3. Sport for Development: The Least Visible Dimension

The third element of the conceptual model, Sport for Development, appears weakly represented in the analyzed communication strategies. The results show a very limited presence of narratives focused on community participation, inclusion, or social development, as well as a scarce visual representation of people in the content disseminated on social media. This relative absence is significant from the perspective of the model, since the literature on sport for development has emphasized the potential of sport to promote social inclusion, education, public health, and community cohesion (Coalter, 2013; Giulianotti, 2011; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2013).

Empirical evidence suggests, therefore, that these dimensions are underrepresented in institutional digital communication, reinforcing the interpretation that the strategies analyzed prioritize international positioning and tourism promotion objectives over narratives linked to internal social development. This is relevant because, within the triangle, the vertex of sport for development serves a balancing function: it provides a dimension of social and internal legitimacy that can complement the more external logics of branding and diplomacy. When this dimension is weakened or barely visible, sports communication can appear excessively focused on external reputational projection, leaving less room for narratives of social benefit, cohesion, or inclusion.

5.4. Sportswashing as an Interpretive Outcome

At this point, it is crucial to situate the results of our analysis within the contemporary debate on sportswashing. As Skey (2022) points out, the term has frequently been used as a media label, but its analytical value increases when it is understood as a critical interpretation that emerges from the relationship between an intensely positive sports narrative and a controversial political context. Similarly, Fruh et al. (2022) insist that sportswashing does not simply describe a sports policy, but rather processes of symbolic distraction, conflict minimization, and reputational normalization through the spectacle of sports.

Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, sportswashing is not interpreted as an autonomous political strategy, but rather as a possible outcome within our political triad of sports. That is, it can emerge when strategies of sports place branding, sports diplomacy, or even Sport for Development

are critically reinterpreted in contexts of reputational controversy (Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Grix et al., 2023; Skey, 2022; Fruh et al., 2022). This is precisely one of the main contributions of the model: to shift sportswashing from the position of an “initial category” and situate it as a contingent outcome, dependent on the interaction between motivations, narrative, political context, transparency, and public reception.

The results of the communication analysis reveal several rhetorical conditions that, according to the literature, can favor this type of interpretation: a strong predominance of positive narratives focused on modernization and events; the use of international sports alliances as mechanisms of symbolic legitimation; and the limited visibility of social or normative dimensions in institutional communication. However, these patterns do not allow us to infer direct political intent. Rather, they suggest that the strategies analyzed are primarily situated within the logic of sports place branding and sports diplomacy, while sportswashing should be understood as a possible critical interpretation, dependent on the political context and international public debate.

Here, it is particularly fruitful to reconnect the contributions of Anholt (2007, 2011) with those of Grix and Brannagan (2024). Returning to the concept of competitive identity, it can be argued that the reputational effectiveness of these strategies depends largely on the degree of narrative coherence and the ability to maintain a consistent territorial narrative over time. Structured and coherent sports place branding strategies, in which sports are integrated into a broader territorial narrative, are more likely to enhance soft power, to the extent that they succeed in projecting a stable and recognizable image of the country within the international system. This interpretation is fully consistent with the argument put forth by Grix and Brannagan (2024), according to which certain sports initiatives may go through an initial phase of suspicion or reputational controversy, but if they succeed in becoming institutionalized and generating sustained legitimacy, they may ultimately function as instruments of soft power.

From this perspective, the case of Rwanda can be interpreted as an example of a relatively structured communication strategy, in which sport, tourism, and territorial modernization are articulated within a consistent narrative of international positioning. In contrast, when communication strategies appear more fragmented or lack a clear narrative architecture, as suggested by the results observed in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the instrumentalization of sport may be more exposed to critical interpretations. Following the argument of Grix et al. (2023), in these contexts, international public debate may interpret sports investments primarily in terms of sportswashing, especially in their initial phases, characterized by media controversy, political denunciation, and reputational pressure. In other words, the reputational success or failure of these strategies depends not only on the sporting activity itself, but also on the ability to integrate sport within a broader, coherent, and legitimate territorial project.

In this sense, the discussion helps to reinforce the usefulness of the proposed triangular model: it not only allows for classifying the political functions of sport, but also for explaining why some strategies tend to consolidate as successful cases of territorial promotion and strengthening of soft power, while others become trapped in frameworks of reputational suspicion and international controversy. This is precisely where the study's main theoretical contribution lies: showing that sportswashing should not be analyzed as the essence of the political use of sports, but rather as a contingent outcome that emerges when the projected narrative fails to bridge the gap between sporting visibility, strategic coherence, and the underlying political context.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this study has been to develop and apply an integrative conceptual framework that allows the analysis of the political use of sport in the construction of institutional reputational projection, placing the phenomenon of sportswashing within a triangular model that articulates three strategic dimensions: sports place branding, sports diplomacy and Sport for Development.

Based on an analysis of 684 social media posts from institutional accounts linked to regional promotion efforts in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo—two countries in the African Great Lakes region that are politically and militarily at odds (Ginesta, 2024)—the results reveal distinct communication patterns in the way both countries incorporate sports into their communication strategies and international outreach efforts.

First, the results suggest that the digital communication of the analyzed accounts focuses primarily on themes related to sports place branding, where sport appears as a symbolic resource associated with tourism promotion, territorial modernization, and international visibility. In this sense, Rwanda's communication strategy exhibits greater narrative coherence compared to the Congolese case, recurrently integrating references to modernity, international events, and sports alliances within its institutional communication.

Second, aspects related to the dimension of sports diplomacy are represented more indirectly, especially through references to international sporting events and collaborations aimed at increasing the external visibility of the territories analyzed. Although explicit references to sports diplomacy are limited within the corpus, the institutional narratives observed allow us to identify discursive elements compatible with public diplomacy and international projection strategies described in the literature on international sports policy.

Finally, and in contrast to the other two dimensions discussed, the Sport for Development dimension appears relatively underrepresented in the institutional narratives analyzed. References to community participation, social inclusion, or local development are scarce compared to content focused on tourism promotion and international positioning, suggesting that communication strategies prioritize narratives associated with international visibility.

Drawing on this context, the study helps clarify the academic debate on sportswashing, proposing that it be understood not as an autonomous political strategy, but as a contingent interpretive outcome that can emerge when certain strategies of sports diplomacy or place branding are critically reinterpreted in contexts of reputational controversy. This perspective allows for the overcoming of overly prescriptive or simplistic approaches, situating the phenomenon within a broader analytical framework that takes into account the multiple political functions of sports.

In this sense, the comparative case of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo suggests that the consolidation of soft power in international sports strategies depends largely on narrative coherence, institutional articulation, and the ability to integrate sport within a broader territorial project. Structured, coherent, and sustained sports place branding strategies can help consolidate a region's soft power, while those that are more fragmented or lack a clear narrative framework may be more vulnerable to critical interpretations in the international public debate.

In short, the main contribution of this study is to reframe the debate on sportswashing from an integrative perspective, showing that sports should not be analyzed solely as an instrument of public reception, but rather as a multifunctional political resource whose interpretation depends on the interaction between

strategic narrative, political context, and public reception. From this perspective, the model of the political triad of sport proposed in this study offers a useful conceptual tool for comparatively analyzing the role of sport in contemporary strategies for enhancing the international profile of states.

6.1. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

Like any exploratory study based on digital communication analysis, this research has some limitations that should be noted. First, the empirical analysis is based on institutional publications on social media, which allows for an examination of the communication strategies deployed by official stakeholders, but does not allow for a direct measurement of the reception or interpretation of these narratives by international audiences.

In this regard, although engagement analysis provides insights into the ability of certain content to mobilize audiences, it does not constitute a direct measure of the reputational impact of these strategies on the international perception of the countries analyzed. Furthermore, engagement metrics should be interpreted with caution, as the dynamics of interaction, algorithmic visibility, and user participation differ across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Therefore, while the indicators used allow for the identification of general trends in communication performance, they are not fully equivalent or comparable measures in absolute terms across digital platforms.

Second, the study focuses on a specific time period (the year 2025) and a limited set of institutional accounts linked to tourism and territorial promotion in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. While this approach allows for the identification of relevant communication patterns, future research could broaden the analysis by incorporating longer time series or comparisons with other countries that have developed similar sports diplomacy or sports place branding strategies.

Furthermore, the methodological approach adopted is based primarily on digital content analysis, which means that the results are interpreted from the perspective of strategic communication. Future research could complement this approach through media framing analysis, interviews with institutional officials, or studies of international perception, which would allow for a more in-depth examination of the interaction between institutional narratives, media coverage, and public reception.

Finally, the study focuses on the communicative dimension of sports strategies, without directly addressing their long-term political, economic, or social effects. In this regard, future research could explore how sports place branding and sports diplomacy strategies evolve over time and under what conditions they succeed in establishing themselves as effective instruments of soft power or, conversely, become entangled in reputational controversies associated with the debate on sportswashing. This is a crucial aspect that must complement exploratory studies such as this one and will ultimately allow us to understand how sports have been adopted as a diplomatic and socioeconomic development strategy by many states—from the African nations analyzed to those in the Middle East that have hosted major sporting events or hope to do so in the future. Despite these limitations, this study provides relevant empirical evidence on the relationship between digital communication, sports diplomacy, and the construction of reputational projection, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the political use of sports in the contemporary context.

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