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THE BAHRAINI GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO PROJECT BAHRAIN'S NATIONAL IMAGE THROUGH HOSTING FORMULA ONE (2022-2024)

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Abstract:

This study aims to describe the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period amid international scrutiny of the country's human rights situation. The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. Data were collected through a literature review and written interviews with three informants selected based on their relevant professional experience in international sporting-event management, tourism, and public-sector communication. Their responses were used as contextual perspectives to complement documentary evidence rather than as direct evidence from Bahrain-based actors. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, and were interpreted using the concepts of sports diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing. The findings show that the Bahraini government pursued two forms of effort through hosting Formula One at the international and domestic levels. At the international level, these efforts involved building and maintaining relations with Formula One Management through the continued hosting of the Bahrain Grand Prix and long-term cooperation. At the domestic level, the efforts involved strengthening the governance of Formula One through inter-agency coordination and utilizing the event as a means of tourism promotion through its integration into the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026. These efforts took place amid international scrutiny of the human rights situation and allegations of sportswashing. The findings indicate that Formula One was utilized as part of the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image, while such efforts continued to take place within a pre-existing critical international perceptual environment.

Keywords: Sports Diplomacy, Nation Branding, Sportswashing, Formula One, Bahrain

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sport has increasingly been used by states as a means of engaging in international relations. The ability of sport to reach people from diverse backgrounds provides states with opportunities to interact with international publics while introducing their national identity and image (Rofe, 2018). One way in which this is pursued is through the hosting of international sporting events, which bring host countries into contact with communities, organizations, media, and various actors from other countries.

Among various international sporting events, Formula One stands out because of its popularity and global reach. During the 2022-2024 period, this reach was further expanded through the use of media and digital platforms, including the broadcast of the Drive to Survive series on Netflix and its growing presence on social media (Hawes, 2024). According to Nielsen Sport data cited by Brown and Thompson (2024), Formula One is broadcast in more than 180 countries and attracts more than 750 million viewers each season. This global reach brings international attention



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to host countries and provides opportunities to introduce various aspects of the host country through the Grand Prix and its associated activities.

Bahrain is one of the countries that has sought to capitalize on this opportunity. Bahrain has hosted Formula One since 2004 and has incorporated the event into its efforts to strengthen the country's position internationally (Luckings, 2025). In 2022, Bahrain also secured an extension of its Formula One hosting contract through 2036 (Formula 1, 2022). During the same period, the hosting of Formula One was incorporated into the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026. The strategy was developed to support the Economic Recovery Plan, diversify the economy, increase the contribution of the tourism sector, and strengthen Bahrain's competitiveness as an international tourism destination. Formula One is positioned as one of the implementations of the Sports & Recreation pillar within the strategy (Government of Bahrain, 2025; Bahrain News Agency, 2025). The Bahrain Grand Prix is also accompanied by various promotional activities that introduce Bahrain's tourism potential, culture, and attractions to international audiences (Khatib, 2022; Szecowka, 2024).

However, the continuation of Formula One hosting has taken place amid international scrutiny of the human rights situation in Bahrain. During the 2022-2024 period, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), and ARTICLE 19 highlighted various concerns, including restrictions on civil liberties, the detention of activists and human rights defenders, the conditions of political prisoners, and freedom of expression (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024; BIRD, 2024; ARTICLE 19, 2024). Such scrutiny has also been reflected in advocacy concerning the Bahrain Grand Prix. In 2022, 27 human rights organizations sent an open letter to Formula One following the extension of the hosting contract through 2036, calling on Formula One to ensure that the Grand Prix would not contribute to sportswashing (Hameed, 2022). Advocacy continued in 2023 through open letters addressed to Formula One and the FIA, as well as international media coverage concerning the relationship between the Grand Prix and human rights criticism (Lynch, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). In 2024, ARTICLE 19 and 25 other organizations again called for respect for human rights and urged that the Bahrain Grand Prix not be used as a means of sportswashing (ARTICLE 19, 2024). The Guardian also used the term sportswashing in its coverage of Formula One in Bahrain (Richards, 2022).

The use of sport for state interests amid scrutiny of domestic conditions has also received attention in previous studies. Grix and Brannagan (2024) examined the use of international sporting events in foreign policy, while Prakoso and Kresnawati (2022) and Chintami et al. (2021) examined sport as an instrument of diplomacy and public diplomacy to increase visibility and strengthen national image. Kobierecki and Strożek (2020) and Knott et al. (2024) further demonstrated how international sporting events can be incorporated into nation branding strategies. Putri et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate that international sporting events can provide opportunities for governments to promote national brands and tourism, as illustrated by South Korea's use of the 2002 World Cup and the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Meanwhile, Søyland (2020) examined sportswashing criticism of the use of sport when sporting events take place amid human rights concerns. Studies focusing specifically on Formula One have also been conducted by Crantz (2024), Ahmadli (2024), Ibnuyasa and Rasyidah (2023), and Rulief (2023), who examined Formula One in relation to national image, diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing, respectively. These studies demonstrate that international sporting events, including Formula One, can be examined in relation to various state interests and issues associated with efforts to build a national image.



Nevertheless, the existing literature leaves a more specific gap concerning the use of Formula One in Bahrain. Previous studies focusing on Formula One have examined cases such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Azerbaijan, while studies on sports diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing have largely examined other sporting events or different national contexts. These studies provide important insights into the relationship between sport and national image, but they do not specifically examine the Bahraini government's efforts through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period. This period is particularly relevant because Bahrain continued to host the Formula One Grand Prix while extending its hosting agreement through 2036 and incorporating Formula One into the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, at the same time that the event remained subject to international scrutiny concerning human rights and sportswashing allegations.

This study therefore contributes a case-specific examination of Bahrain by bringing together three analytical perspectives: sports diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing. Sports diplomacy is used to identify how Formula One functions as a sporting instrument through relations and cooperation with actors within the Formula One environment; nation branding, particularly the Tourism and Governance dimensions of Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon, is used to examine how Formula One is incorporated into tourism promotion and government governance; while sportswashing is used to understand the emergence of criticism and allegations surrounding the event in the context of pre-existing negative information about Bahrain. By examining these three perspectives together, this study focuses on the efforts undertaken by the Bahraini government at the international and domestic levels rather than assessing whether these efforts successfully changed international perceptions of Bahrain. Based on this focus, the research question is: What efforts did the Bahraini government undertake to project Bahrain's national image through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period?

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to describe the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period. The study focuses on identifying the efforts undertaken by the Bahraini government rather than assessing their effectiveness or determining whether they resulted in changes in international perceptions of Bahrain.

To address this focus, data were collected through a literature review and written interviews. The literature review covered books, journal articles, reports from international organizations, official publications by the Bahraini government, Formula One, and the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), as well as relevant news reports and other documents. Documentary sources were selected based on their relevance to the main focus of the study, particularly the hosting of Formula One in Bahrain during the 2022-2024 period, the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, the human rights context surrounding Bahrain, and the relationship between sport and national image. These sources provided the primary documentary basis for establishing factual information concerning Bahrain and its hosting of Formula One.

To complement the documentary sources, written interviews were conducted to obtain professional perspectives on international sporting-event management, tourism development, and public-sector communication. The informants were selected purposively based on the relevance of their professional experience to these aspects of the study. The first informant was Adiprabowo Wicaksono, Infrastructure Assistant Manager at PT Jakarta Propertindo (Perseroda), whose professional experience relates to the management of international sporting events and supporting infrastructure. The second informant was Ferdiansyah Maydelta, First Expert Policy Analyst at the



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Tourism, Food Security, Marine Affairs, and Agriculture Subgroup, Economic Affairs Division, South Jakarta Administrative City Secretariat, whose professional background relates to tourism development and destination promotion. The third informant was Ahmad Sodri, Head of the Administration and Public Relations Subdivision, General Affairs and Protocol Division, South Jakarta Administrative City Secretariat, whose professional background relates to public communication and government public relations.

The interviews were conducted after the researcher visited each informant's office in person to request permission to conduct the interview. Each informant provided oral consent to participate and requested that the interview be conducted in written form. Accordingly, a single list of questions was sent to each informant through WhatsApp on 19 June 2026. The questions addressed their professional perspectives on international sporting-event management, the relationship between sporting events and tourism promotion, government involvement in event management, and public communication and image-building. Ferdiansyah Maydelta submitted his written responses on 19 June 2026, while Adiprabowo Wicaksono and Ahmad Sodri submitted their responses on 23 June 2026.

Given the professional and geographical position of the informants, their responses were treated as contextual perspectives rather than direct evidence of Bahraini government decision-making. The three informants were based in Indonesia and were not directly involved in Bahraini government policies, decisions, or practices. Their responses were therefore used to provide professional perspectives that could complement and contextualize the documentary evidence, based on their respective experience in international sporting-event management, tourism promotion, and public-sector communication. They were not used to represent the views of Bahraini government officials or other actors directly involved in the Bahrain Grand Prix.

The two sources of data were subsequently triangulated by comparing relevant interview responses with information obtained from official government publications, academic literature, reports from international organizations, Formula One and FIA publications, and other relevant documents. The interview responses were not used independently to establish factual claims concerning Bahrain. Instead, they were compared with documentary evidence to strengthen the interpretation of issues related to event management, tourism promotion, government involvement, public communication, and national image. Where documentary sources directly documented the actions or policies of the Bahraini government, those sources served as the primary basis for the corresponding claims.

Following this process, the collected data were analyzed using the model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, information relevant to the hosting of Formula One in Bahrain, the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, human rights concerns, sportswashing allegations, and the government's efforts at the international and domestic levels was selected and organized. The selected data were then presented narratively and interpreted using the analytical framework established in this study. The analysis was directed toward identifying and describing the Bahraini government's efforts without assessing their effectiveness, success, or impact on changes in international perceptions of Bahrain.

Sports Diplomacy. The development of diplomatic practices involving an increasingly diverse range of actors and instruments has made sport one of the means used in international relations. Murray (2018) explains that the universal character of sport enables it to reach international audiences and, under certain conditions, facilitate communication and relationship-building on a



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broader scale than conventional diplomatic channels. This development has given rise to the concept of sports diplomacy, which Murray (2018) defines as the conscious, strategic, and sustained use of sport, sportspeople, and sporting activities by state and non-state actors to build mutually beneficial collaborative relationships in support of diplomatic objectives.

Murray (2018) explains the practice of sports diplomacy through four elements: sport, sporting events, sportspeople, and non-state sporting actors. Sport and sporting events serve as platforms that bring different actors together and create opportunities for communication and international relations. Sportspeople refers to individuals involved in sport who can contribute to building relationships across societies, while non-state sporting actors include sports organizations, competition organizers, media, sponsors, and other non-state actors that can cooperate with governments.

In this study, the concept of sports diplomacy is used to analyze how the Bahraini government utilizes the hosting of Formula One as an instrument in its efforts to project the country's national image. The four elements identified by Murray (2018) are used to examine how sport, sporting events, sportspeople, and non-state sporting actors are utilized to support the Bahraini government's diplomatic efforts during the 2022-2024 period.

Nation Branding. The concept of nation branding is used to explain how a country builds and projects its image to international audiences. According to Anholt (2005), a country's image is shaped by the various experiences, interactions, and representations that international audiences receive in relation to a country. To understand this process, Anholt (2005) developed the Nation Brand Hexagon, which consists of six dimensions: Tourism, Exports, Governance, Investment and Immigration, Culture and Heritage, and People. These dimensions represent different aspects through which a country interacts with international audiences and through which perceptions of the country may develop. Anholt (2007) subsequently explained through the concept of Competitive Identity that a country's reputation is not built through slogans or communication campaigns alone, but through the alignment of policies, actions, investments, and communication manifested across these dimensions.

In this study, the Nation Brand Hexagon is used as an analytical framework to examine the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image through hosting Formula One. The selection of dimensions is based on their direct relevance to the forms of government efforts examined in this study, particularly the use of Formula One for tourism promotion and the government's policies and governance of the event. Based on this criterion, the analysis focuses on the Tourism and Governance dimensions. The Tourism dimension is used to examine how Formula One is utilized as a means of promoting Bahrain as an international tourism destination, including through promotional activities and the integration of Formula One into the country's tourism development agenda. The Governance dimension is used to examine government policies, institutional support, and inter-agency coordination in the organization of Formula One. The other four dimensions are outside the analytical scope of this study because the research does not specifically examine Bahrain's exports, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, or people as distinct areas through which Formula One is used to project the country's national image. Although Formula One may have indirect connections with these dimensions, such connections are not the focus of the present study. The Tourism and Governance dimensions therefore provide the analytical basis for identifying the specific government efforts examined in this research.

Sportswashing. As the use of sport as an instrument of diplomacy and national image-building has expanded, a critical perspective has also emerged that questions the use of sport by entities facing scrutiny over political, social, or human rights issues. In this context, Bergkvist and



Skeiseid (2024) define sportswashing as a deliberate effort by an entity to use sports properties to counter or mitigate the impact of negative information associated with that entity. This definition encompasses three main elements: a deliberate effort, the use of a sports property, and the presence of negative information that the use of sport seeks to address. Success in changing perceptions or reputation is not a prerequisite for understanding an action within the framework of sportswashing.

In this study, the concept of sportswashing is used to understand the various criticisms that emerged regarding the hosting of Formula One in Bahrain during the 2022-2024 period, rather than to conclude that the Bahraini government engaged in sportswashing. The concept is used to examine the relationship between international scrutiny of Bahrain's human rights situation, the use of Formula One as a sports property, and the responses from various international actors to these efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Bahraini Government's Efforts at the International Level through Hosting Formula One. At the international level, the hosting of Formula One in Bahrain during the 2022-2024 period was supported by a long-standing institutional relationship between Bahrain International Circuit (BIC) and Formula One Management (FOM). In organizing the Bahrain Grand Prix, BIC served as the promoter of the event, while FOM was responsible for the commercial rights and the global organization of the Formula One World Championship (Formula 1, 2022). The continuation of this relationship enabled Bahrain to remain on the Formula One calendar throughout the research period. The relationship had been established since Bahrain first hosted Formula One in 2004 and was further formalized through the extension of the hosting agreement until 2036 announced by Formula One in February 2022 (Formula 1, 2022).

The extension of the hosting agreement provides an important indication of the continued commitment to maintaining Bahrain's position within the Formula One championship. The agreement was formally concluded between FOM and BIC as the event promoter, while the institutional connection between BIC and the Bahraini state is reflected in BIC's ownership by Bahrain Mumtalakat Holding Company (Mumtalakat), the sovereign wealth fund of the Bahraini government. Formula One's announcement of the extension also acknowledged HRH Prince Salman's contribution to the partnership, while Khalid Al Rumaihi, CEO of Mumtalakat, highlighted BIC's role within Mumtalakat's portfolio and its contribution to Bahrain's motorsport development (Formula 1, 2022). These institutional links indicate that the continuation of Formula One involved sustained engagement between Bahrain's state-linked institutions and the international Formula One environment, rather than representing solely an agreement between independent event organizations.

This continued engagement was reflected in the organization of the Bahrain Grand Prix throughout the research period. The Grand Prix was held in 2022, 2023, and 2024, with Bahrain serving as the opening round of the Formula One World Championship in each of these years. The 2024 event also marked 20 years since Bahrain first hosted Formula One in 2004. In addition to the Grand Prix, Bahrain International Circuit hosted supporting activities associated with Formula One, including Formula 2, Formula 3, and pre-season testing (Motorsport Industry Association, 2024; Roberts, 2024; Bahrain International Circuit, 2024). The continuation of these events during the research period demonstrates the sustained presence of Bahrain within the international Formula One environment and provides the empirical basis for examining the relationship through the concept of sports diplomacy



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Murray's (2018) concept of sports diplomacy defines the conscious, strategic, and sustained use of sport, sporting events, sportspeople, and non-state sporting actors to build collaborative relationships that support diplomatic interests. In this study, the framework is used to examine the relationships surrounding Bahrain's continued participation in Formula One. The available evidence most directly supports the analysis of sport, sporting events, and non-state sporting actors, while the role of sportspeople is discussed more cautiously because the available evidence does not establish their direct use by the Bahraini government as an instrument of national image projection.

As a sport, Formula One serves as a medium through which Bahrain participates in an international sporting environment involving states, organizations, teams, and other actors from different countries. Murray (2018) identifies sport as a medium of sports diplomacy because its international character creates opportunities for interaction among actors beyond conventional governmental channels. Formula One reflects this characteristic as an international sporting championship involving various countries, organizations, and sports actors within a single competitive framework. Bahrain's continued participation in the Formula One World Championship therefore provides opportunities for interaction with parties involved in the management of the championship, including FOM. The perspective of Adiprabowo Wicaksono, Infrastructure Assistant Manager at PT Jakarta Propertindo (Perseroda), also supports this understanding. He considers international sporting events to be a means of sports diplomacy because sport can bring a country's position to the international stage. In this context, Formula One provides the broader sporting environment within which Bahrain maintains its engagement with international sports actors.

Within Murray's (2018) framework, sporting events provide a space for interaction among various actors involved in sports diplomacy. The Bahrain Grand Prix performs this function through its continued organization during the 2022-2024 period. Each event brings Bahraini stakeholders together with organizations and actors involved in the management of Formula One through the organization of the race and its accompanying activities. These interactions extend beyond those attending the event in person to audiences following the event through media and online platforms. Adiprabowo Wicaksono explains that the presence of delegations at an international sporting event creates opportunities for direct experiences and interactions, while media and online coverage can broaden attention toward the country in which the event takes place. This perspective helps contextualize the Bahrain Grand Prix as a space through which Bahrain's engagement with the international sporting environment is maintained.

The role of sportspeople requires a more cautious interpretation in the case of Bahrain. Murray (2018) describes sportspeople as athletes and individuals involved in sport who can contribute to cross-cultural communication, strengthen relations between societies, and represent a country's values, identity, and image to international audiences. The Bahrain Grand Prix brings drivers and other sporting personnel from different countries into Bahrain; however, the available evidence does not establish that the Bahraini government directly utilized these individuals as instruments for projecting the country's national image during 2022-2024. Their presence is therefore understood as part of the international sporting environment surrounding the event rather than as a distinct government effort. This distinction is important because international attention involving Formula One drivers during the period also included calls from human rights organizations for drivers to speak publicly about human rights concerns in Bahrain (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The fourth element, non-state sporting actors, is also relevant to the relationship surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix. Murray (2018) includes sports organizations, competition organizers, federations, media, sponsors, and other organizations outside the government within this category.



In the Bahrain case, FOM and BIC represent organizational actors with distinct institutional positions within the Formula One environment. FOM is responsible for managing the commercial rights and global organization of the Formula One World Championship, while BIC serves as the promoter of the Bahrain Grand Prix. BIC, however, requires a more specific institutional classification. Although BIC functions as the promoter and organizer of the Bahrain Grand Prix, it is not entirely independent of the Bahraini state. BIC is a portfolio company owned by Bahrain Mumtalakat Holding Company, the sovereign wealth fund of the Bahraini government. Therefore, in this study, BIC is treated as a state-linked corporate actor operating within the non-governmental organizational structure of Formula One, rather than as a wholly independent private actor. Its operational role as the event promoter places it within Murray's category of non-state sporting actors, while its ownership structure demonstrates the institutional connection between the organization of Formula One and Bahrain's state-linked assets.

The relationship between BIC and FOM therefore illustrates how Bahrain's continued participation in Formula One involves actors with different institutional positions and functions. FOM provides the international commercial and organizational framework of the championship, while BIC functions as the local promoter and is institutionally connected to the Bahraini state through Mumtalakat. The extension of the hosting agreement to 2036, the continued organization of the Bahrain Grand Prix during 2022-2024, and the involvement of state-linked institutions provide evidence of sustained engagement between Bahrain and the Formula One environment. Within Murray's (2018) sports diplomacy framework, these relationships demonstrate how Formula One functions as a medium through which Bahrain maintains international sporting relations through continued participation, institutional cooperation, and interaction with international sports actors. In relation to national image, these efforts can be understood as part of the Bahraini government's broader efforts to project the country within the international sporting environment, while the study does not assess whether these efforts resulted in an actual improvement in Bahrain's international image.

The Bahraini Government's Efforts at the Domestic Level through Hosting Formula One.

Bahrain's involvement in the international sporting environment through hosting Formula One is also supported by domestic policies and management arrangements. During the 2022-2024 period, the Bahraini government integrated Formula One into the national tourism agenda through the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026. The strategy forms part of the Economic Recovery Plan and identifies Sports & Recreation as one of the pillars of tourism development. Under this pillar, Formula One is positioned as one of the international sporting activities supporting the development of Bahrain's tourism sector (Government of Bahrain, 2025; Bahrain News Agency, 2025). The inclusion of Formula One in the national strategy therefore provides a direct policy basis for examining the event as part of Bahrain's domestic tourism and development agenda.

This policy direction was accompanied by an institutional arrangement involving state-linked and government institutions in the preparation and organization of the Bahrain Grand Prix. Bahrain International Circuit (BIC) serves as the main organizer of Formula One in Bahrain and is a portfolio company owned by Bahrain Mumtalakat Holding Company (Mumtalakat), the sovereign wealth fund of the Bahraini government that manages the country's strategic assets. As a state investment institution, Mumtalakat also manages assets that support national development priorities, including the tourism sector (Saha, 2020). BIC's position within this structure establishes an institutional connection between the organization of Formula One and Bahrain's state-linked assets. This connection extends to the preparation and implementation of the Bahrain Grand Prix, which involves various government institutions.



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During the preparation for the event, BIC coordinates with the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Health, Airport Police, Customs Affairs, Nationality and Passports Affairs, Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA), and various other relevant institutions. This coordination covers organizational, logistical, security, media, and visitor service requirements. The coordination is reflected in the Team Bahrain concept, which brings together government institutions and other stakeholders to support the organization of the Bahrain Grand Prix. Shaikh Salman bin Isa Al Khalifa, Chief Executive of BIC, described Team Bahrain as a form of collaboration among various institutions supporting the event (Saxena, 2025). Through this mechanism, the institutions involved contribute according to their respective functions and responsibilities in supporting the organization of Formula One.

These arrangements can be understood through the Governance dimension of Anholt's (2005) Nation Brand Hexagon, which concerns perceptions of government policies, governance, and governmental capacity. In this study, the Governance dimension is used to examine how the Bahraini government establishes a policy direction and coordinates the institutions involved in hosting Formula One. The integration of Formula One into the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, the institutional role of BIC and Mumtalakat, and the coordination among government institutions through Team Bahrain provide Bahrain-specific evidence for examining this dimension.

The role of government coordination in the organization of international sporting events can be further contextualized through the perspective of Adiprabowo Wicaksono, Infrastructure Assistant Manager at PT Jakarta Propertindo (Perseroda). Based on his professional experience in managing international sporting events, he explains that different parties involved in an event have different responsibilities and that government involvement may cover areas such as tourism, customs, communication, security, and public services. He also notes that the experience of delegations and visitors in the host country can be shaped by factors such as security, comfort, cleanliness, and the smooth operation of the event. This perspective is used only to contextualize the governance requirements of international sporting events; the specific governance arrangements in Bahrain are established through Bahrain-specific institutional evidence.

The governance arrangements surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix are also connected to the use of Formula One as part of Bahrain's tourism agenda. The Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026 positions Formula One under the Sports & Recreation pillar as part of tourism development through international sporting activities (Bahrain News Agency, 2025). This policy position was accompanied by tourism promotion activities associated with the Bahrain Grand Prix. In 2024, the Bahraini government promoted the "20 Years of a Modern Classic" campaign in connection with the anniversary of Bahrain's Formula One hosting. The campaign involved cooperation with international tour operators to attract visitors from different countries. The BIC Fan Village in Block 338, Adliya, also extended Formula One-related activities beyond the circuit through entertainment activities and social media influencers intended to introduce Bahrain to a broader audience (Szecowka, 2024). These activities expanded the promotional setting associated with Formula One into public spaces and connected the event with the presentation of Bahrain as a tourism destination.

The use of Formula One for tourism promotion corresponds to the Tourism dimension of Anholt's (2005) Nation Brand Hexagon, which concerns the way a country is presented and experienced as a tourism destination. In the Bahrain case, the connection between Formula One and tourism is explicitly reflected in the statement of Bahrain's Minister of Tourism during the 2024 Grand Prix, which identified Formula One as a key element of the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026 and linked the event to Bahrain's position as a sports tourism destination.



(Szecowka, 2024). The campaign, supporting activities, involvement of influencers, and cooperation with tour operators therefore provide Bahrain-specific evidence of the use of Formula One as a platform for tourism promotion.

The relationship between international sporting events and tourism promotion can be further contextualized through the perspective of Ferdiansyah Maydelta, First Expert Policy Analyst at the Tourism, Food Security, Marine Affairs, and Agriculture Subgroup, Economic Affairs Division, South Jakarta Administrative City Secretariat. He describes a major sporting event as “a promotional stage or a free showcase for a region,” provided that the government makes use of the momentum created by the event. He further explains that governments can connect international events with destination promotion by involving tourism businesses and other relevant stakeholders. This perspective provides a general professional interpretation of how sporting events may be connected to tourism promotion and is not treated as direct evidence of the effects or practices of the Bahrain Grand Prix.

Bahrain-specific tourism data provide further empirical context for the activities associated with the Bahrain Grand Prix. CoStar data recorded hotel occupancy rates in Manama ranging from 87% to 96% across Formula One Weekend event sessions during 2022-2024 (CoStar, 2024). These figures indicate high levels of accommodation activity during the event weekends. However, they are presented as evidence of tourism-related activity occurring alongside the Bahrain Grand Prix rather than as evidence that Formula One alone caused changes in hotel occupancy or tourism performance. Together with the documented promotional activities and the integration of Formula One into the national tourism strategy, these data illustrate the connection established between the event and Bahrain's tourism agenda.

Based on these developments, the Bahraini government's efforts at the domestic level through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period can be understood through the Governance and Tourism dimensions of the Nation Brand Hexagon. Under the Governance dimension, the efforts involved providing a policy direction for Formula One through the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, supporting the event through state-linked institutions such as BIC and Mumtalakat, and coordinating government institutions through the Team Bahrain mechanism. Under the Tourism dimension, Formula One was incorporated into tourism promotion through the “20 Years of a Modern Classic” campaign, cooperation with international tour operators, the BIC Fan Village, social media influencers, and other activities associated with the Bahrain Grand Prix. These efforts show how the Bahraini government connected the organization of Formula One with domestic governance and tourism promotion. Within Anholt's framework, these actions can be understood as part of the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country through governance practices and tourism-related activities associated with Formula One, without implying that the study demonstrates a resulting improvement in Bahrain's national image.

International Scrutiny and Sportswashing Allegations. The Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image through Formula One during the 2022-2024 period took place amid continued international scrutiny of Bahrain's human rights situation. During this period, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), and ARTICLE 19 raised concerns relating to restrictions on civil liberties, freedom of expression, the detention of activists and human rights defenders, and the conditions of political prisoners (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024; BIRD, 2024; ARTICLE 19, 2024). These concerns were also directly connected to the Bahrain Grand Prix by several international human rights organizations and other actors.



The scrutiny became particularly visible in relation to the continuation of Formula One in Bahrain. Following the extension of Bahrain's hosting agreement through 2036 in 2022, 27 human rights organizations called on Formula One to ensure that the Bahrain Grand Prix would not contribute to sportswashing (Hameed, 2022). Similar concerns were raised ahead of the 2023 Grand Prix through an open letter addressed to Formula One and the FIA, which called for greater attention to human rights issues associated with the event (International Service for Human Rights, 2023). In 2024, ARTICLE 19 and 25 other organizations again raised concerns about Bahrain's human rights situation and urged Formula One to investigate alleged violations and ensure that the Grand Prix was not used for sportswashing (ARTICLE 19, 2024). These developments demonstrate that international attention surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix extended beyond the sporting event itself and continued to include discussion of Bahrain's domestic human rights situation.

The concerns raised by these organizations were accompanied by responses from Formula One and the Bahraini government. In 2023, Formula One stated that it sought to be a positive force wherever it raced, including through economic, social, and cultural benefits, and emphasized that it took its responsibilities concerning human rights seriously and had communicated its position to its partners and host countries (Benson, 2023). The Bahraini government likewise stated that it supported the role of Formula One in drawing attention to human rights issues in the countries where it operates and maintained that Bahrain had undertaken human rights reforms (BBC, 2022). These statements demonstrate that the criticisms surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix were contested by the actors directly associated with the organization and hosting of the event. Therefore, the international discourse surrounding Formula One in Bahrain consisted of both criticism from human rights organizations and responses from Formula One and the Bahraini government.

The coexistence of these positions is relevant to the application of the sportswashing concept developed by Bergkvist and Skeiseid (2024). They define sportswashing as a deliberate effort by an entity to use a sports property to counter or mitigate the impact of negative information associated with that entity. Their framework emphasizes the relationship between pre-existing negative information, the utilization of a sports property, and the responses that emerge from the public or other actors. In this study, the concept is therefore used to analyze how sportswashing allegations emerged in the context of Formula One in Bahrain, rather than to establish that the Bahraini government engaged in sportswashing.

In the Bahrain case, the first element of this relationship is represented by the pre-existing negative information concerning the country's human rights situation. As discussed above, international organizations continued to document and criticize various human rights issues during the 2022-2024 period. The second element is the continued use of Formula One through the Bahrain Grand Prix, which the Bahraini government incorporated into its broader efforts involving international sporting relations, governance, and tourism promotion. The third element is represented by the responses that emerged from international actors, including criticism and allegations that Formula One could contribute to sportswashing. These three conditions occurred simultaneously during the research period, creating the context in which sportswashing allegations surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix emerged.

The pattern of responses also demonstrates that the international exposure generated by Formula One did not produce a uniform interpretation of Bahrain. Human rights organizations associated the event with continuing human rights concerns, while Formula One and the Bahraini government presented the event as capable of generating broader economic, social, cultural, and human rights-related benefits. This difference in interpretation is important for understanding the sportswashing concept because the use of a sports property does not automatically produce a



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particular public response. Rather, the same sporting event can become a platform through which different actors communicate competing interpretations of the host country and its actions.

This relationship can be further contextualized through the perspective of Ahmad Sodri, Head of the Administration and Public Relations Subdivision, General Affairs and Protocol Division, South Jakarta Administrative City Secretariat. Based on his professional perspective on public communication, he explains that efforts to build an institutional image may face difficulties when other issues receive greater attention from the public and media. He notes that crisis-related, controversial, or widely circulated issues can dominate the information environment, causing positive messages to receive less attention. This perspective is used as contextual professional insight rather than as evidence concerning Bahrain specifically. In the context of this study, it helps explain why promotional messages associated with an international sporting event may coexist with continued attention to other issues concerning the host country.

The Bahrain case therefore illustrates the relationship identified by Bergkvist and Skeiseid (2024) between negative information, the utilization of a sports property, and the responses that emerge around its use. Formula One continued to be utilized as part of the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country internationally, while human rights organizations and other international actors continued to associate the Bahrain Grand Prix with concerns regarding Bahrain's human rights situation. At the same time, Formula One and the Bahraini government presented different positions concerning the role and implications of the event. The resulting sportswashing allegations can consequently be understood as part of the critical responses that emerged around the use of Formula One in a context where negative information about Bahrain remained internationally salient.

Accordingly, the concept of sportswashing in this study does not establish whether the allegations directed at Bahrain are valid, nor does it determine that the Bahraini government engaged in sportswashing. Instead, it provides an analytical lens for understanding why such allegations emerged alongside the Bahraini government's efforts to project the country's national image through Formula One. The findings therefore indicate that the use of Formula One during 2022-2024 took place within a pre-existing international perceptual environment in which efforts to project Bahrain through sport were accompanied by continuing scrutiny and competing interpretations concerning the country's human rights situation.

CONCLUSION

The Bahraini government undertook two forms of effort to project the country's national image through hosting Formula One during the 2022-2024 period. The first effort was undertaken at the international level through the establishment and maintenance of relations with actors within the Formula One environment, particularly through the continued hosting of the Bahrain Grand Prix and the extension of the hosting agreement until 2036. From the perspective of Murray's sports diplomacy, these efforts placed Formula One as a medium through which Bahrain maintained its engagement with the international sporting environment through continued participation, institutional cooperation, and interaction with international sports actors. The role of sportspeople, however, is understood more cautiously, as the available evidence does not establish that the Bahraini government directly utilized drivers or other sportspeople as instruments of national image projection during the study period.

The second effort was undertaken at the domestic level through the governance and tourism-related management of Formula One. Based on Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon, these efforts can be understood through the Governance and Tourism dimensions. The Governance dimension was



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reflected in the integration of Formula One into the Bahrain National Tourism Strategy 2022-2026, institutional support through state-linked institutions such as Bahrain International Circuit and Bahrain Mumtalakat Holding Company, and coordination among various government institutions involved in organizing the Bahrain Grand Prix. Meanwhile, the Tourism dimension was reflected in the use of Formula One as a platform for tourism promotion through the “20 Years of a Modern Classic” campaign, cooperation with international tour operators, the BIC Fan Village, social media influencers, and other activities associated with the event.

These efforts took place alongside continued international scrutiny of Bahrain's human rights situation. Human rights organizations and other international actors associated the Bahrain Grand Prix with existing concerns regarding human rights and raised allegations of sportswashing, while Formula One and the Bahraini government also expressed their respective positions regarding the role and implications of the event. In this study, the concept of sportswashing developed by Bergkvist and Skeiseid (2024) is used to understand the emergence of these allegations through the relationship between negative information, the use of a sports property, and the responses surrounding its use. The concept is not used to establish that the Bahraini government engaged in sportswashing. The findings therefore show that Bahrain's use of Formula One as part of its efforts to project the country's national image took place within a pre-existing international perceptual environment in which human rights concerns remained salient.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a case-specific examination of Bahrain's use of Formula One during the 2022-2024 period and by bringing together the perspectives of sports diplomacy, nation branding, and sportswashing. The combination of these perspectives allows the study to examine the government's efforts through Formula One at the international and domestic levels while also situating those efforts within the critical international environment surrounding the event. In particular, the study identifies how the continued relationship with the Formula One environment, domestic governance arrangements, and tourism promotion were connected to the use of the event for national image projection.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, the study employs a qualitative descriptive design and focuses on identifying and describing the efforts undertaken by the Bahraini government; therefore, it does not measure changes in international perceptions of Bahrain or determine the effectiveness of these efforts in improving the country's national image. Second, the study relies on written interviews with three informants whose professional backgrounds are relevant to international sporting-event management, tourism, and public communication, but who are based in Indonesia and are not directly involved in Bahraini government policy-making or the organization of the Bahrain Grand Prix. Their responses were therefore used as contextual professional perspectives rather than as direct evidence of Bahraini government decision-making. Documentary and institutional sources remain the primary basis for claims concerning Bahrain.

Future research could further examine the relationship between Formula One and Bahrain's national image by incorporating the perspectives of Bahrain-based government officials, event organizers, tourism stakeholders, or other actors directly involved in the Bahrain Grand Prix. Further studies could also examine international audience perceptions of Bahrain before and after Formula One events or compare Bahrain with other countries that use Formula One as part of their national image and tourism strategies. Such approaches would complement the descriptive findings of this study by examining the reception and potential effects of sports-based national image projection.



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