

# The Rio Olympic Games: an analysis of Brazilian Soft Power<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

At the closing party of the 2016 Olympic Games, Brazil also concluded its mega-events cycle. The project, which began in 2007 with the choice of the host country for the Soccer World Cup, turned Brazil into the only country to host the two major sporting events in a row. An epic that lasted almost ten years, crossed the mandate of three presidents, saw the country go from a period of accelerated growth to the most significant economic crisis in its history and a moment of great political instability. This article seeks to offer the reader the image that Brazil built abroad during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, having as its subject the analysis of the reports published in the New York Times.

**Keywords:** Sports Mega-Events; Brazil; Soft Power; Media

## Los Juegos Olímpicos de Río: un análisis del Soft Power brasileño

### Resumen

En la fiesta de clausura de los Juegos Olímpicos de 2016, Brasil también concluyó su ciclo de megaeventos. El proyecto, que comenzó en 2007 con la elección del país sede de la Copa Mundial de Fútbol, convirtió a Brasil en el único país en albergar los dos grandes eventos deportivos seguidos. Una epopeya que duró casi diez años, atravesó el mandato de tres presidentes, vio al país pasar de un período de crecimiento acelerado a la crisis económica más importante de su historia y un momento de gran inestabilidad política. Este artículo busca ofrecer al lector la imagen que Brasil construyó en el exterior durante los Juegos Olímpicos de Verano de 2016, teniendo como tema el análisis de los reportajes publicados en el New York Times.

**Palabras clave:** Megaeventos deportivos; Brasil; Poder suave; Medios de comunicación

## Os Jogos Olímpicos do Rio: uma análise do Soft Power brasileiro

### Resumo

Na festa de encerramento dos Jogos Olímpicos de 2016, o Brasil também encerrou seu ciclo de megaeventos. O projeto, que começou em 2007 com a escolha do país-sede da Copa do Mundo de Futebol, transformou o Brasil no único país a sediar os dois grandes eventos esportivos consecutivos. Um épico que durou quase dez anos, atravessou o mandato de três presidentes, viu o país passar de um período de crescimento acelerado para a crise econômica mais significativa de sua história e um momento de grande instabilidade política. Este artigo busca oferecer ao leitor a imagem que o Brasil construiu no exterior durante os Jogos Olímpicos de Verão de 2016, tendo como tema a análise das reportagens publicadas no New York Times.

**Palabras-chave:** Megaeventos Esportivos; Brasil; Poder Suave; meios de comunicação

## Les Jeux Olympiques de Rio : une analyse du Soft Power brésilien

### Résumé

Lors de la soirée de clôture des Jeux olympiques de 2016, le Brésil a également conclu son cycle de méga-événements. Le projet, qui a débuté en 2007 avec le choix du pays hôte de la Coupe du monde de football, a fait du Brésil le seul pays à accueillir consécutivement les deux grands événements sportifs. Une épopée qui a duré près de dix ans, traversé le mandat de trois présidents, a vu le pays passer d'une période de croissance accélérée à la crise économique la plus importante de son histoire et à un moment de grande instabilité politique. Cet article vise à offrir au lecteur l'image que le Brésil a construite à l'étranger lors des Jeux olympiques d'été de 2016, ayant pour sujet l'analyse des reportages publiés dans le New York Times.

**Mots-clés:** Méga-événements sportifs ; Brésil; Douce puissance; Médias

### Introduction

Sports mega-events are undergoing significant transformations, moving from glamour, with countries and cities duelling to host the events, to rejection, with cities and countries withdrawing their candidacy for not having popular support. Concretely little of the famous legacy remains; however, the socialization of losses and the individualization of profits are fully perceived. The event is considered a facilitator for corruption, especially in countries with fragile democracies.

In order to understand the transformations and ramifications of an event of this magnitude, many studies will still be necessary, with a wide range of subjects to address, such as but not limited to economy, corruption, legacy, urban and sports development, health, and social contribution.

The idea of this study was to analyse the effects on international relations by hosting mega-events using Soft Power as an analysis category and ask: do mega-events, in fact, offer to the host countries the platform to disseminate their culture, natural beauties, political values, and institutions, creating an image that may contribute to greater prominence on international relations? In the case of Brazil, can the long-awaited permanent seat on the UN Security Council be conquered with international political actions such as sports mega-events? What is the image of Brazil built from the 2016 Olympic Games?

As an introductory study, aiming to provide subsidies for a more in-depth discussion in the future, we will analyse the coverage of only one vehicle, The New York Times, during the Olympic Games. We consider this newspaper representative due to its vast readership and credibility, which assures that the disclosed information will have significant repercussions.

Based on a theoretical discussion about Soft Power, this work analyses the political implications involved in hosting a sports mega-event, especially in developing countries, to, from this perspective, analyse the coverage of The New York Times, seeking to understand how the newspaper described Brazil and how this moment could affect the country's image abroad and its position in the sphere of international relations.

### Soft Power in International Politics

In the book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power," from 1990 and later in a series of articles and other publications, Joseph S. Nye Jr would reinterpret the notion of power in international politics, dividing it into two broad categories, Hard and Soft, terms that have become established, both in academia and in politics itself, being also the subject of speeches by the most varied international leaders, such as Hu Jin Tao in 2007, when, at the 17th congress of the communist party, referred to the need for China to increase its Soft Power (HUANG, DING, 2006; DING, 2010).

The notion of Hard Power can be defined, from a direct point of view, as the ability of a nation to coerce others, described by Nye as incentives and threats. Hard Power studies will focus on military and economic power and on diplomatic threats as tools for a state to achieve its goals (CAMPBELL, MICHAEL, O'HANLON, 2006).

On the contrary, Soft Power is how a country obtains results in international politics because other countries admire its values, aspire to its level of prosperity, and end up following it. For Nye, power in international relations

is the ability of a country to achieve the results that interest it in international politics through coercion (Hard Power) or co-optation (Soft Power) (KEOHANE, NYE, 1977).

Critics of Soft Power will attest to the difficulty of separating Hard from Soft, or how much of each element exists in a country's real influence, and the fact that it is impossible to follow the interrelationship between them. Responding to criticisms, Nye (2004) and other theorists formulated the Smart Power category, which is the combined use of Hard and Soft elements (WILSON, 2008).

Nye will break down Soft Power's sources into three main elements: (1) culture, (2) political values, and (3) international politics.

(1) Culture encompasses aspects of society and its values insofar as they are attractive to others, such as countries that seek to reproduce the way of life and traditions of the most highly regarded nations. Trade, cultural exchange, and tourism disseminate a country's culture.

(2) Political Values can be defined by how a country's institutions and values are understood abroad, based on how it deals with political and social issues within its territory.

(3) International politics is the set of conditions that give a country greater legitimacy than others at the time of international debate, being able to be a reference for the others with its opinion on a given subject, a strength built from its history of positioning in global issues and conflicts.

In Soft Power studies, the nation is the protagonist of international relations, acting cohesively and rationally. Even if non-state subjects are increasingly prominent on the international scene, their impact still lies on the influence or not of their national states (COOPER, 2004). According to Morgenthau (2003, p; 173), "politics is the manifestation of a power struggle, and it is justified in ethical, legal or biological terms."

The centrality of the concept of power in political theory and by Nye (1990b) is a characteristic of the realist school. For this school, the relations between different nations are disputes for power which, in the end, is the ultimate goal of each country, measured mainly in military and economic terms.

Nye will understand power as something broad; in this sense, the different elements of empowerment could not be transferred from one nation to another as a simple copy, nor is its existence a direct guarantee of influence and coercion. There are intangible elements that are important in politics and international power relations. In the new international relations, the theory of power as something more fluid makes sense after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nye's theory also proves to be a good tool for analysing the new international scenario and the growth of the BRICS, especially for China (HOLSTI, 1985, p.4).

In the 1977 text, "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition," Nye, together with Robert O. Keohane, will use the concept of interdependence, founding what is now considered the institutional neoliberal school of international relations, understanding that in most states, even those that are expanding, prefer to use existing institutions in the pursuit of international power and prestige.

The concept of interdependence legitimizes Soft Power once it considers that military and economic coercion are not the only means, nor the most used, in the search for prestige and international influence, allowing subjects to pursue these objectives in other, often legitimate, ways and may ascend within the established order without necessarily destroying its institutions and agreements.

## **Soft Power and Sports Mega-Events**

Today, mega-events enjoy massive visibility in the academic world, and there is no need to discuss what mega-events are, what characterizes them, and the historical process of consolidating sports as a mega-event. Many researchers address these questions in greater depth than can be developed here. An extensive bibliography can be consulted, including the references in this article, to provide a theoretical basis for this universe.

Since the event's announcement, the host country will be on the spotlights of the international media, being a recurring subject in the news in many countries that have incorporated these shows as a cultural component. Topics such as the progress of construction, tourist safety, expenses, delays, terrorism, and protests are discussed almost daily.

During the event, the eyes of the world turn to the country, which in addition to being occupied by many

tourists, also attracts the international press and its readers. According to data from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), half of the world's population watched some coverage of the Olympic games, and the official videos available on the internet were, alone, watched 7 billion times. According to Google measurements, the search for information about the Rio de Janeiro was ten times bigger during the 2016 event than at any other time.

Despite the main focus being the sports festival, the global audience ends up indirectly having contact with other aspects of the country, and these aspects are what we sought to analyse here.

The notion of Soft Power offers several tools to understand this new social phenomenon, the sporting mega-events (MANZENREITER, 2010; PREUSS, CHRISTIAN, 2011; GRIX, LEE, 2013): (1) tourism and cultural values projected internationally; (2) functioning of state institutions during the event, and (3) social values that the country presents in concrete reality. In this new scenario, sports mega-events present an opportunity for the country to spread its image to the world and reach a global audience through the universal values of the games reach a global audience.

There is no consensus on the success of Soft Power in sports mega-events, the article by Manzenreiter (2010) "The Beijing Games in the Western Imagination: The Weak Power of Soft Power", points out, based on global data, the weak impact of the transformation in Western people's perception of Chinese society in terms of human rights, freedom of expression and institutional guarantees, however, presents positive data on Chinese culture, tourism, economic poignancy and infrastructure (2010, p.45). In the same sense, questioning the power of Soft Power, Brannagan and Giullianotti (2014) discuss the way in which Qatar is using the World Cup to establish itself as a western friendly nation, which, on the one hand, generate serious local crises, but on the other hand, bring a significant increase in multinational transactions and in tourism.

Therefore, here we point to a two-way analysis: mega-events may or may not increase the Soft Power of the host country, moreover, the assertion that the sports mega-event alone would bring gains in international politics is false.

As discussed above, Nye divides Soft Power sources into three main categories: (1) culture, (2) political values, and (3) international politics (NYE, 2008).

(1) Culture is disseminated by the event through journalistic coverage, and the large number of tourists wandering around the country having contact with its most different manifestations not always positive. The opening and closing events culminate with increasingly cinematic presentations that aim to showcase the nation's qualities and achievements.

(2) Political values are disseminated in the competition's organization and the institutions' functioning. As the event approaches, institutions, the respect for human rights, and the situation of life in the country undergo scrutiny by international public opinion, also driven by NGOs and social movements that use the visibility of the moment to publicize their causes (JENNINGS, 2014).

(3) In international politics, the outcome of games is less evident. The host country can gain in this aspect, as the visibility given to its institutions and culture in the period can guarantee a new international prestige. This aspect, however, is linked to the performance of the other two, culture and political values.

Assessing the Soft Power of events is very complicated since, due to its increasing importance, hosting them involves changes in the most diverse aspects of the country, from urban mobility and housing to political and legal ones (PREUSS, 2007, p. 68). In the field of Soft Power, the expenditure of billions of dollars, the supposed profit, and a massive audience do not represent, by themselves, the success of the enterprise and can result in massive failures, as Ziaks (2015) pointed out at the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Likewise, the results obtained by Brazil in the 2014 World Cup are questionable.

Brazil's crushing defeat and historic triumph of Germany in the infamous 7x1 game was used as a counterargument in international politics. Two weeks after the game, Brazil voted at the United Nations General Assembly in favour of an investigation into the existence of alleged war crimes by Israel in the Gaza Strip. The Brazilian government justified its vote by the "disproportionate use of force by the Israelis." In response, the spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Yigal Palmor, in an interview for the most prominent Brazilian television network, understands Brazil as a diplomatic dwarf and troublemaker and concludes, using the following allegory to justify his position:

*"Israel's response is perfectly proportionate. This is not football. In football, when a game ends in a tie, you think it is proportional, and when it is 7-1, it is disproportional. Sorry to say, but that is not the case in real life and under international law"* (SPOKESMAN, 2014).

For the winner of the match and the Brazil's World Cup, the joy of victory boosted the use of the national flag, which, as Burak Ünveren for the Deutsche Welle newspaper (ÜNVEREN, 2021), is undergoing a gradual

reinterpretation since 2014. The flag, existing since 1949, was ostensibly used as a patriotic symbol only 65 years later, after the historical success over Brazil, a moment of permissibility for the exaltation of the nationalist spirit. Likewise, the effects of such change in socialization are questionable since its appropriation by the extreme right parties, an element now distinctive in their protests.

## **Brazil in the New York Times pages**

We have already discussed the difficulties of measuring a country's Soft Power and how the general population abroad views it. Through journalistic discourse, stereotypes are created and crystallized, reinforcing pre-existing ideologies; this movement is not immutable, with messages changing over time. Brazilian Soft Power encompasses the country's image abroad and how its institutions and culture are perceived worldwide.

Understand how Brazilian culture, its music, art, and cuisine are appreciated abroad; how politics and institutions functioning are interpreted; the influence of violence in the daily life of Brazilians; as well as the evolution of sympathy and cordiality notion of its people, are interpreted abroad, provides a vital subsidy to understand how the country relates in the world sphere and how it positions itself in strategic matters, such as trade and tourism.

In our view, the Olympic Games represent a crucial moment in the consolidation of Brazilian's image abroad, being able to both expose a new Brazil to the world as well as confirm existing stereotypes and prejudices. The massive interest in games, and the continuous production of information, put many people in contact with news about the Brazilian reality, who would not have this type of interaction in other situations. The games' coverage contributes to forming an image of the country, and it seems that it will remain in the international imagination for a long time.

Analysing the international coverage of the Olympic Games is a task that goes far beyond the scope of this work. That is why we chose to analyse in-depth the coverage of a single vehicle, The New York Times (NYT) (<https://www.nytimes.com/>). The NYT is the world's third most accessed news site and 117th overall. It was one of the pioneers to enter the digital world, having a global readership and an undisputed reputation as a reliable source of information. We consider this newspaper a representative source to try to understand the international coverage of the games in Rio, both for its global reader base and for its ability to influence the coverage as a whole, either by selling news to other periodicals or by its ability to guide the speech.

We analysed NYT coverage encompassing the day before the opening and the day after the closing party, between August 4th and 22nd, 2016, selecting reports that discussed elements present in the Soft Power concept described by Nye. We divided the newspaper's production into three pre-established categories, developed from the three elements of Soft Power, culture, political values, and international politics. We understand, however, that journalistic production is multiple, where a report can be subject to different interpretations, and any attempt to separate the content produced by the newspaper into static categories is subject to a margin of error. We then sought to select the reports based on their fundamental matters to create a framework based on the central themes.

(1) Culture: we selected the reports that directly approached the lifestyle, and cultural values considered memorable of the Brazilian people, as well as elements referring to natural beauties, historical heritage, cuisine, and music.

(2) Political Values: we selected the articles that discussed the functioning of Brazilian institutions, their efficiency, and effectiveness, as well as the general values of the population regarding topics such as human rights, inequality, and prejudice.

(3) International Politics: we separated the news that discusses the position of Brazil on the most diverse themes of international relations.

Based on these criteria, we selected 222 reports produced by the NYT during the Olympic Games period. The newspaper produced 46 articles mostly addressing Brazilian culture, 165 referring to political values, and only 11 discussing international politics.

### **(1) Culture**

The NYT analysed Brazilian cultural elements in 46 articles; however, the newspaper did not delve much into this topic, restricting its articles to elements directly related to Rio de Janeiro and brought into focus by the event

without worrying about bringing, to its readers, a broad and diversity view of Brazilian culture or present a picture of the country as a whole. The newspaper, for example, dedicates only three articles exclusively to Brazilian music and, in two cases, addresses the song *Garota de Ipanema* composed in 1963 and used in the opening party of 2016.

The most interesting element that emerged from analysing the newspaper's reports is the maintenance of the traditional stereotypes associated with Brazil and the Brazilians. In this sense, the beach, samba, football, and tropicality continue to be understood by the NYT as fundamental elements of Brazilian identity, without any attempt to delve into the country's diversity and multiplicity.

Brazilian people continue to be portrayed from the traditional perspective of cordiality, informality, little attention to rules and etiquette, and always ready to celebrate and get emotionally involved with the situation.

This type of brazilianness will often be associated with the way Brazilians cheer. The attitude of Brazilian spectators during the games will be a theme frequently highlighted by the newspaper, always in opposition to what would be the traditional etiquette of the Olympic games, which the newspaper will refer to as a "cultural shock."

Booing, cheering for the weakest, and aggression towards the opponent are seen as a part of Brazilian culture, related to the prevalence of football values and often in conflict with what should be the correct attitude of an Olympic spectator, to the annoyance of many people, including athletes who, especially when playing with Brazilians, came into conflict with the crowd.

## **(2) Political Values**

This was the most numerous category, with the production of 163 reports that fit this aspect. Unlike culture, the vehicle provided to the readers a broad approach of the country's political situation, social conflicts, and the functioning of national institutions. The most recurrent elements were event's infrastructure-related, social inequality, the political crisis that the country was going through, the case of swimmer Ryan Lochte and the arrest of IOC executives accused of selling tickets illegally.

The event's organization will be one of the most highlighted topics by the newspaper, with 35 articles on this subject. The newspaper will report almost daily the most varied problems the organization faces.

Some of the problems highlighted by the newspaper were: violence, queues, and lack of signage, the quality of the water in Guanabara Bay (which the city of Rio de Janeiro had promised to clean up), and, mainly, the swimming pool in the water park that, to the embarrassment of the organizers, turned green with no apparent explanation. In this sense, the newspaper will never show any excitement about the event or the city, adopting a reticent posture until the end of the games.

In all its aspects, inequality will be the subject of 19 reports. In this sense, analysing the coverage as a whole, this subject is always portrayed as a country's central theme. The NYT understands Brazilian society as extremely unequal, not only in the economic sense of the term but also in terms of gender, racial and regional differences. To highlight the idea of "a country of contrasts," the newspaper will often oppose the opulence of the Olympic Park, on the one hand, and the precariousness of the Rio favelas, on the other.

An interesting case, which shows how media coverage helps build an image of a country, changing its Soft Power, is the case of Brazilian rugby player Isadora Cerullo, proposed by her girlfriend after the award ceremony. The newspaper celebrated the fact and placed Brazil as a "Gay Friendly" country, mainly in opposition to the homophobic policy of Russia (host of the Football World Cup), ignoring that Brazil is a leader in several rankings of violence against the LGBTQIA+ community.

The economic and political crisis will also find resonance in the pages of The New York Times, which will always highlight the "Olympic size" of Brazil's problems in both economics and politics, closely following the spending cuts, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and the countless processes of a political nature. Despite them, the newspaper will not question the functioning of Brazilian institutions or its democratic process.

In addition to the general debate around domestic politics, two issues, in particular, were highlighted by the newspaper, with effects on the development and transformation of Brazilian Soft Power: the case of swimmer Ryan Lochte and the arrest of the directors of the Olympic Committee accused of selling tickets illegally.

The case involving the four American swimmers, Ryan Lochte, Gunnar Bentz, Jack Conger, and Jimmy Feigen, was the most talked-about matter at the Olympics, with the NYT dedicating 52 stories to this topic alone. The episode, which ended up becoming an international incident, shows how mega-events can impact the image of a country and how press coverage serves to modify and transform its Soft Power.

In this specific case, the four swimmers returning from a party stopped at a gas station in Barra da Tijuca around six in the morning and got into a scuffle, having to pay for some broken items at the station. The next day, however, Lochte gave an interview claiming that he and his companions had been victims of an overnight armed robbery. Safety has always been a central concern for organizers, with many doubts about the organization's ability to keep fans and athletes safe. The case of four Olympic medallists robbed at gunpoint was an example of the organization's lack of capacity.

Rio's police will quickly understand the crime's solution as a matter of honour, and the athletes' versions were contested and later denied. In the newspaper pages, it is possible to perceive the transformation in relation to the characters and international relations. At first, Brazil would be portrayed as the culprit, with a government unable to contain violence and inequality, only to be turned into a victim, a nation that opened its doors only to be abused by visitors. The reports on Ryan Lochte would follow the opposite path, being at the end, labelled by the newspaper as "Ugly American," an athlete who, in the position of representative of the United States, shamed the nation by contributing only to deepen the already widespread stereotypes of Americans as ignorant people, who do not know how to behave abroad and does not respect the culture and country of others.

The other emblematic case is the investigation involving the illegal sale of tickets. During the event, Brazilian authorities arrested and charged several IOC members accused of illegally selling tickets. The same situation happened during the Football World Cup in 2014, with several members of the International Football Federation (FIFA) also being investigated and accused of similar crimes. The newspaper widely discussed the case, showing the efficiency and pioneering spirit of the Brazilian authorities in dealing with this problem, as well as that, even with the most diverse problems, the country has institutions that work and are capable of identifying and punishing criminals, regardless of its power.

### **(3) International policy**

The minimal space dedicated to this category, only 11 reports, most of them related to the anti-terrorism efforts during the event, is significant and more studies are needed to understand what this absence actually represents. The lack of attention to the topic may be related to the fact that the events are held in national territory, which would imply focusing coverage on the specificities of the country and not on its relationship with the outside world, or the fact that Brazil, despite recent advances, is still not seen as a country with significant international influence, so that its positions concerning the most diverse issues of diplomacy are considered irrelevant by the newspaper.

## **Final considerations**

This work sought to demonstrate the validity of Soft Power as a category of analysis of international relations and apply it to the understanding and analysis of journalistic coverage of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The first major problem encountered is to think whether a short-term event can interfere in international politics instantly. Defining the success or otherwise of a mega-event, as we have already discussed, is a highly complex task involving a series of eventually contradictory variables. In the Brazilian case, there are no conclusive elements to consider the increase of Soft Power in an absolutely safe way, as there are positive and negative notes, requiring a new long-term analysing international policies and their successes and failures.

The Olympic Games in Rio provided unprecedented visibility on the international scene, as the internet searches mentioned at the beginning of this article reveal. In this way, we think that Brazil managed to expose itself. However, it was not successful in strongly leveraging its Soft Power. We can indicate violence, social inequality, and democratic fragility as negative points and the dissemination of cultural diversity, tourism, and the imprisonment of members of the International Olympic Committee as positive aspects.

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