



# Country image, cultural diplomacy, and sports during the COVID19 pandemic: Brand America and Super Bowl LV

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## Abstract

Although the Super Bowl became a national celebration of American culture, capitalism, and lifestyle, Super Bowl LV held in 2021 had a different tone, being held a few weeks after the attacks on the US Capitol, and during the COVID19 pandemic that by then cost the lives of over 400,000 in the United States. This study aims to answer the research question: How is the image of the United States projected through the coverage of Super Bowl LV in international media? After analyzing 114 media articles published by 19 national news outlets from 13 different English-speaking countries, five themes emerged from the data: (a) shared culture and values, (b) sociopolitical climate, (c) the pandemic, (d) the event, and (e) positionality. Using Buhmann and Ingenhoff's four-dimensional country image model for analysis, findings of the study suggest that while American culture is being celebrated, American norms, ethics, and values are criticized, leading to a mixed international image. The study is significant as it contributes to the literature on country image, public diplomacy, and the sociocultural role of sports in Brand America and suggests a conceptual model for using sports for nation branding during the pandemic.

**Keywords** Soft power · Nation branding · Place branding · National identity · Football

## Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore and analyze the role of sports in nation branding and public diplomacy during the pandemic by analyzing the projected image of the United States (USA) through international media covering Super Bowl LV (SBLV), held in Tampa, Florida, on February 7, 2021. The Super Bowl (SB) is not only one of the USA's most significant annual domestic traditions (Real 1975; Dyreson 2017), but it also plays a role in the diffusion of American culture and American ideology abroad (Dzikus 2017). SBLV included some of the previous SB traditions such as a halftime performance and expensive creative commercials but was also different in several ways. SBLV is the first SB held during the presidency of Joe Biden. During Donald Trump's administration, the former president called to fire NFL players protesting during the national anthem (Boykoff and Carrington 2020). Furthermore, some players

and teams refused to visit the White House after winning the championship (Dubinsky 2021; ESPN 2018), and even the SB itself became a stage for protest by the athletes and by halftime performers. SBLV is also the first SB taking place during the deadly COVID19 pandemic. The 2021 SB game took place one year and one day after the first COVID19 identified death in the USA. Since the outbreak of the pandemic and as of February 2021, over 400,000 people in the USA have died from the coronavirus. The pandemic also changed the world of sports and the NFL, canceling and postponing games, and having a variety of safety protocols including teams holding games in empty stadiums or with a limited number of fans. Super Bowl Weekend usually creates an economic impact of hundreds of millions of dollars (O'Reilly et al. 2008) not only through out-of-city fans attending the game but through parties and other related events. With the pandemic and the health restrictions, fewer fans attended the game and much of the events were held virtually. Also, SBLV was the first SB after the insurrection of January 6, 2021, and the attacks on the US Capitol. This article analyzes the projected image of the USA through the coverage of SBLV in international media through different nation branding perspectives (Fan 2010), and uses Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) four-dimensional country

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image model. Based on the findings, the study suggests a revised model for using sports for nation branding purposes during the pandemic. The role of the SB in American culture, in American identity, the different economic impacts, and even the use of American football as part of spreading American values has been studied through multiple scholars for decades (Butterworth 2008; Dzikus 2017; Hopsicker and Dyreson 2017; Real 1975), yet there is a gap in the literature about the way international audiences frame America through the SB. By focusing on international coverage of the game, this article fills some of that gap.

## Country image, nation branding and sports

This study aims to explore and analyze the portrayed image of the USA and Brand America by international media outlets. Thus, the theoretical framework of this study focuses on theories and lenses analyzing the role of sports in country image and nation branding. Countries, cities, and communities have been using sports to improve their images and achieve social, political, and economic goals for hundreds and even thousands of years (Dubinsky 2019). Countries' images are studied through lenses and theories from political science, business management, communication, and socio-psychology (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) suggest a four-dimensional model evaluate a country's image. The functional dimension pertains to the competencies and competitiveness of a country including the political and economic performance, the normative dimension pertains to beliefs regarding the norms and values of a country, and the esthetic dimension pertains to the attractiveness of the culture, history, and scenery of a country. An attitude consists of three components: (a) a cognitive component that pertains to knowledge, (b) an affective component that is involved with feelings and emotions, and (c) a behavioral component that pertained to undertaken action based on knowledge and feelings (Grewell and Levy 2021). While the first three dimensions of a country's image are cognitive components, the fourth dimension, the sympathetic dimension, is an affective component that pertains to feelings and fascination for a country (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). The functional, normative, and esthetic dimensions impact the sympathetic dimension. Country image is one of the outcomes of the process of nation branding (Fan 2010). According to Fan (2010), nation branding is composed of export branding, place branding, political branding, and cultural branding.

From political science and international lenses, a country's image is impacted through soft power, foreign policy, and public diplomacy (Cull 2008; Nye 2008). The term soft power refers to the use of attraction to achieve a more favorable image of a country, rather than military power or

economic sanctions (Nye 2008). The three main resources of soft power are political values, foreign policy, and culture. The traditional definition of public diplomacy refers to the use of communication with foreign publics to achieve foreign policy goals (Cull 2008). More contemporary definitions also analyze the role of the private industry through corporate diplomacy and private citizens through people-to-people diplomacy (Dubinsky 2019). Fan (2010) refers to political science as political branding. During the Cold War, the USA has been using smart power, a combination of both hard power and soft power, to achieve its dominant status as a superpower. In the context of sports, manifestations include forming relationships with China following table-tennis games (Pigman 2014) and boycotting the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow as a retaliation for the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan (Murray 2019).

From business management perspectives, countries' images have been analyzed through two main approaches on nation branding (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015; Fan 2010): tourism-based approach in which a place is analyzed through its attraction as a tourism destination (Anholt 2010), and product-based (Jaffe and Nebenzahl 1993) in which the country-of-origin is analyzed through its business industry, its workforce, and associated products. In the context of country image and nation branding, Fan (2010) refers to product-based branding as export branding and to destination-based approaches as place branding. Heslop et al. (2010) analyzed the impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on the image of China in the eyes of Americans and Canadians, evaluating the images of China as a vacation destination, using the following criteria: quality of service, amount of wilderness, sports facilities, ease of getting around, ease of finding place of interest, accommodation, restaurants, climate, peaceful, for the whole family, safety, your knowledge of China, attractiveness of scenery, variety of services, originality of experience, culturally interesting, entertainment, shopping facilities, memorability of experience, proud to visit, willingness to travel to, willingness to recommend, overall ratings, overall ratings compared to other countries, and tourism attractiveness. From a product-based approach, factors such as the "made-in label" and the country-of-origin are analyzed. Martin (2007) analyzed "Brand America" arguing that some of the characteristics associated with the USA and with Americans include capitalism, freedom, along with insensitivity, ignorance, arrogance, and self-absorption. He argues that the sports company Nike embodies characteristics that pertain to the American experience and that the "Nike Swoosh is a badge that identifies the wearer as someone who's energetic and a bit of the rebel, whether roller-blading or lying in a hammock" (Martin 2007, p. 99).

From communication lenses, countries' images have mostly been analyzed through mass media. Two central



theories for mass media analysis are agenda-setting and framing (Entman 1993; McCombs and Shaw 1972). According to agenda-setting theory, the media does not tell its audience what to think but what to think about (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Framing theories, on the other hand, analyze how and why a story was presented in a certain way (Entman 1993). According to Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015), the “central role of mass media in the formation of country images has stimulated numerous content analyses evaluating images of certain countries as portrayed in foreign media” (p. 108). For example, Oh et al. (2020) analyzed the media framing of the Unified Korean Olympic Women’s ice hockey team consisting of players from both South Korean and North Korea through newspapers and social media during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang. They (Oh et al 2020) found that from an agenda-setting perspective, progressive outlets framed the team more positively, while conservative papers either covered the team less or framed it negatively.

From socio-psychology perspectives, a country’s image is analyzed through collective identity and national identity including stereotypes and distinctions between in-group and out-group (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). National identity includes shared ideology, identity, values, history, culture, common myths and memories, beliefs, and other socially constructed characteristics (David and Bar-Tal 2009). Fan (2010) refers to national identity as cultural branding. Hobsbawm (1992) coined the term imagined communities, arguing that sports play a role as an expression “an expression of national struggle, and sportsmen representing their nation or state, primary expression of their imagined communities” (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 143). Such struggle could be seen in the 1968 Olympic Games when Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested when the American anthem was played during the medal ceremony against racial injustice in the USA (Murray 2019) and was kicked off the team. More recently, when NFL player Colin Kaepernick and the United States Women’s Soccer Team (USWNT) star Megan Rapinoe knelt during in protests of racial injustice in the fall of 2016, they were portrayed as labeled “anti-American, anti-military, and anti-nationalist” (Schmidt et al 2018, p. 654). Shared values change over time, as in 2019, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) admitted Smith and Carlos into its Hall of Fame (Shinn 2019), and in 2020, after the demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd by a policeman in Minnesota, the NFL apologized for not listening to players protesting racism (ESPN 2020) and US Soccer repelled the rule of banning protests during the American national anthem (Associated Press 2020). Trump was a populist and a separatist president (Dubinsky 2021), who withdrew from international initiatives such as the Paris climate agreement use rhetoric of putting America first. When analyzing the role of sports in Brand America and in US public

diplomacy during Donald Trump’s presidency, Dubinsky (2021) identified several trends: (a) domestic power struggles shape international relations, (b) the USA uses gender for diplomacy, (c) Brand America has questionable values, (d) sports diplomacy manifests in different forms, and (e) chaos creates energy, but exposes the vulnerabilities of a country. This article further adds to the discussion on the intersection of country image, nation branding, and sports by analyzing the first largest sports event America hosted in the post-Trump era.

## Football and Brand America

To address the research question on the projected image of America through SBLV, the study sets the conceptual framework around the role of American football and of the SB in American society, American history, and globalization. Association football, known in the USA as soccer, and rugby, inspired the development of American football in the second half of the nineteenth century (Krechmar et al 2017). The first American football game between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869 was inspired by soccer codes, and the sport developed in the 1870s from revisions of the British rugby reflecting “patterns and practices of American nationalism” (Krechmar et al. 2017, p.309). The role of football in American national culture increased with technological development such as live television coverage and the first SB in 1967 which in the next half a century became “a beacon of American nationalism “ (Dyreson 2017, p. 151). Literature on the role of the SB as “the most lucrative spectacle in American mass culture” (Real 1975, p.31), goes back to the 1970s and since then dozens of scholars have analyzed some of its national and international impacts and manifestations. Some of the manifestations of nationalism in previous SB pre-games include collaborations with armed forces, such as US Air Force flyovers, Air Force Academy Choir and the US Marine Corps Marching Band, and patriotic gestures and images through the Pledge of Allegiance by the Apollo 8, Apollo 11, and Apollo 17 (Hopsicker 2017). The national anthem became one of the most iconic patriotic traditions, most notably in 1991, with Whitney Houston’s memorable performance during the first Persian Gulf War (Hopsicker 2017). The terror attacks of 9/11 were also followed by patriotic gestures, in the following SB and when New York held the game for the first time since the attacks (Butterworth 2008), indicating the role of sports in democratic citizenship and the war against terror. According to Hopsicker (2017), while the Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provoked attention to nationalism associated with the SB, “overwhelming evidence suggests that the NFL has continuously engaged since the earliest



staging of the game in connecting ‘Americanness’ to the Super Bowl” (p. 37).

Beyond nationalism and affiliations with armed forces and patriotism, the SB also serves as a manifestation of American exceptionalism (Dyreson 2017), and since the 1980s became attached to politics, capitalism, and the White House (Hopsicker 2017), with presidents making congratulating phone calls or even hosting the champions. The connections between the SB, American lifestyle, and capitalism, led to the development of traditions around the game. According to Hopsicker and Dyreson (2017), “Super Bowl Sunday stands as the day when Americans celebrate conspicuous consumption—a public demonstration of the American ability to buy things” (p. 3). Companies invest millions of dollars for 30 min commercial ads known as ‘Ad Bowl,’ and “celebrities of all genera vie to sing the national anthem or headline the halftime extravaganza on a stage viewed by over two-thirds of Americans” (Hopsicker and Dyreson 2017, p. 2). In the twenty-first century, football games dominate the rating charts and the annual most-watched telecast in the USA is the SB, drawing between 98 million and 114.4 million viewers between 2010 and 2020, with eight of them being the eight most-watched telecasts in American history (SMW, n.d.). The SB advertisements not only represent American commercialism, but companies also capitalize on the large audience through inclusive messages such as gender equity, racial harmony, diversity, and even a multi-ethnic cast singing “America the Beautiful” (Hopsicker and Dyreson 2017). Furthermore, the popularity of the SB provides opportunities for other countries to brand themselves as attractive tourism destinations with commercials promoting travel to Ecuador and Australia, by exposing their scenery, culture, wildlife, or celebrities to American and global audiences (Marcus 2018). Several companies used the SB to promote their product, which also exposed their country-of-origin (Fan 2010), such as Turkish Airlines or Avocados from Mexico (Dua 2020). Beyond the revenues generated via television rights and commercials, the SB creates an economic impact of hundreds of millions of dollars through non-residences coming not only to the game but also to experience the surrounding parties and related events in the host city (O’Reilly et al. 2008). Such commercially related traditions and impacts, all contribute to a shared American experience and give Super Bowl Sunday a statue of a national holiday and a civic religion (Butterworth 2008).

Although football and the SB are a significant component of American culture, that is not the case outside the USA. According to Woods and Butler (2021), American football is not even one of the top ten most popular sports worldwide in terms of watching and participating. At least ten games from the 2018 FIFA World Cup exceeded in ratings the most-watched SB games (2018 FIFA World Cup Russia 2018; SMW, n.d.). Even annually, the UEFA Champions League

Final enjoys higher global viewership than the SB (Vertelney 2018). There are several explanations or speculations about the different impacts, including the violent nature of American football (Dyreson 2017). The game of football receives much criticism regarding on-field and off-field violence, with concussions leading to short-term and long-term brain damage, and can manifest in aggressive behavior including murder, domestic violence, sexual violence, and suicide (Woods and Butler 2021). Furthermore, there is also much criticism on the exploitation of college football players who generate billions for the universities and other stakeholders and are not allowed to get paid although being worth hundreds of thousands in an open market (Borghesi 2017). Yet, although the American sports system was not adapted globally, to argue that American football and the SB do not have an impact on the perception of the USA will also be inaccurate.

American football has been covered internationally since the late nineteenth century by British newspapers (Dzikus and Dubinsky 2018). After World War II and during the Cold War, American soldiers deployed in Berlin used American football to stay in touch with home and that contributed to the globalization of the game (Dzikus 2017). According to Dzikus (2017), the SB played an important role in the diffusion of American football in Germany and with that also shaped the cultural image of the USA. Although Dzikus (2017) uses lenses of globalization to analyze the diffusion of football in Germany, such an argument exemplifies a way of how the USA used football as part of smart power (Nye 2008) strategies to achieve more favorable images abroad and eventually win the Cold War. As a world hegemon, the image of the USA deteriorated over the years, especially after the invasion of Iraq (Martin 2007; Nye 2008), neglecting its soft power and focusing mostly on hard power. The connections between football and the SB with armed forces might reinforce that image.

Since 2016, the connection between football and American nationalism has changed especially with the rising of evidence of police brutality and racial discrimination against African Americans, a demographic that is overrepresented in the sport (Woods and Butler 2021). Beyoncé’s performance in the 2016 halftime show was deemed “anti-police and anti-American” (Gammage 2017) by policy unions and the public. Later that year, populist Presidential Candidate Donald Trump criticized Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players for protesting during the national anthem and disrespecting the flag (Cooper 2019). As a polarizing populist president, Trump even called owners to sanction protesting athletes, saying: “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He’s fired. He’s fired!’” (Boykoff and Carrington 2020). According to Nye (2019), “America’s place in that world may be threatened



more by the rise of populist politics at home than the rise of other powers abroad” (p. 80). During Trump’s chaotic presidency, the image of the USA has tarnished abroad, with American media reporting that other countries “pity” the USA for mishandling the coronavirus pandemic and portraying America as anarchy after white supremacist Trump supporters took over The Capitol as the Congress and the Senate were confirming the election of Joe Biden as the next president, questioning the authenticity of the Democratic image of the USA (Ellyatt 2021; Pop and Dube 2021). Also, while Trump encouraged universities to hold a college football season during a pandemic (Vazquez and Carvajal 2020), American scholars criticized the US system through international media portraying it as exploitative (Borghesi 2017; Silva et al. 2020). As a result of Trump’s divisive rhetoric and policies, the connection between football and the White House changed as the 2018 SB champions Philadelphia Eagles declined the traditional visit to the White House (Dubinsky 2021; ESPN 2018) and after the killing of George Floyd, the NFL officially supported athletes protesting during the national anthem. Thus, an act seen as “anti-American” when Kaepernick was protesting in 2016 (Schmidt et al. 2018) was embraced by the establishment, shedding new light on the images of football and America. This study explores and analyzes the projected image of the USA to international audiences during the first mega event held in America, through a sport that captures American civic religion (Butterworth 2008), weeks after the end of a chaotic presidency of a separatist president (Dubinsky 2021), during an unprecedented and deadly global pandemic.

## Methods

This study aims to explore and analyze the role of sports in nation branding during the COVID19 pandemic, by focusing on SBLV and the image of the USA. The study tries to answer the research question: How is the image of the United States projected through the coverage of Super Bowl LV in international media? To answer the questions, the study uses content analysis (Flick 2014; Krippendorff 2004) of online national news outlets in countries in which English is an official spoken language, followed by a conceptual and theoretical analysis through country image (Buhmann and Inghoff 2015) and nation branding (Fan 2010) lenses.

### Data collection

For the data collection, the study used purposeful sampling of online international news outlets from 13 countries in which English is at least one of the official spoken languages: Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Nigeria, India, Singapore, England, Ireland, Canada, Barbados,

Jamaica, Guyana, and Belize. Several other countries were looked at but were not analyzed in the study if no coverage of the SB was identified or if the only published articles were from syndicated organizations. The countries and the articles were identified through BBC’s Country Profiles index (BBC, n.d.) during February 2021. Due to different time zone differences, deadlines, potential holidays, or other miscellaneous circumstances between the different countries, to capture articles previewing SBLV and that covered the game itself, the study analyzed articles published between February 5 and February 9, 2021, giving each media outlet a five-day window to address the event. To maintain consistency, articles published before that timeframe or after it were not analyzed in this study. According to Krippendorff (2004) qualitative researchers use multiple and diverse sources when conducting content analysis, to capture multiple interpretations. Thus, for triangulation and reliability purposes (Flick 2014), and to increase diversity (Krippendorff 2004), the study focused on private and public media outlets from all five continents.

Overall, this study analyzed 114 articles, published in 19 media outlets from 13 different countries. 73 of the analyzed articles were published by privately owned news outlets, and 41 by state-owned media outlets. As the objective of the study is to analyze international coverage, articles from syndicated press agencies such as Reuters, the Associated Press (AP), or Agence France-Presse (AFP) were not analyzed in the study unless the local news outlet contributed to the article as well. In an attempt not to over-emphasize the coverage in one country, no more than two news outlets were chosen per country, and coverage from countries from all five continents is analyzed in the study. Table 1 summarizes the data collection.

### Data analysis

For the data analysis, the study used four rounds of manual coding according to Saldaña’s (2016) manual coding for qualitative researchers. In the first round, all 114 articles were read, and each sentence, paragraph, segment, or article received an *in vivo* code, also known as literal coding or verbatim coding (Saldaña 2016), capturing the exact words of the text. In the second round, the identified codes were grouped into 51 categories using topical coding. When *in vivo* coding was not applicable, topical coding was used to capture the shared topic of the codes in the category. *In vivo* coding and topical coding methods are popular and applicable to almost every qualitative research, but they also have a purposeful use for initial rounds of descriptive coding (Saldaña 2016). In the third and fourth rounds, the study used focused coding, grouping the 51 categories into 14 subthemes, and ultimately coming up with five different umbrella over-arching themes: (a) shared culture and values,



**Table 1** Number of analyzed items about SBLV in international media outlets

| Continent | Country      | Media outlet              | Ownership | No. of items |
|-----------|--------------|---------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Africa    | Nigeria      | Independent               | Private   | 1            |
|           | South Africa | The South African News 24 | Private   | 2            |
| America   | Barbados     | Loop News Barbados        | Private   | 2            |
|           | Belize       | The San Pedro Sun         | Private   | 2            |
|           | Canada       | CBC                       | Public    | 21           |
|           | Jamaica      | The Gleaner               | Private   | 3            |
|           | Guyana       | Kaieteur News             | Private   | 1            |
| Asia      | India        | The Times of India        | Private   | 2            |
|           |              | The Indian Express        | Private   | 4            |
|           | Singapore    | Channel News Asia         | Private   | 2            |
| Europe    | England      | The Guardian              | Private   | 12           |
|           |              | BBC                       | Public    | 8            |
|           | Ireland      | RTE                       | Public    | 8            |
|           |              | The Irish Times           | Private   | 8            |
| Oceania   | Australia    | The Sydney Morning Herald | Private   | 12           |
|           |              | ABC                       | Public    | 6            |
|           | New Zealand  | NZ Herald                 | Private   | 6            |
|           |              | Stuff                     | Private   | 4            |
| Overall   | 13           | 20                        |           | 114          |

(b) sociopolitical climate, (c) the pandemic, (d) the event, and (e) positionality. Following the thematic analysis, the study used Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) four-dimensional country image model and the different nation branding lenses Fan (2010) categorizes, to suggest an integrated and revised model for using sports for nation branding purposes during the pandemic.

## Findings

The findings of the study answer the research question: How is the image of the United States projected through the coverage of Super Bowl LV in international media? Although SBLV received the lowest tv ratings for a Super Bowl game in over a decade with 96.4 million viewers (Young 2021), the SB is still the most-watched televised event in the USA. After analyzing the 114 relevant published articles, five themes emerged from the data: (a) shared culture and values, (b) sociopolitical climate, (c) the pandemic, (d) the event, and (e) positionality. Table 2 summarizes the coding and categorizing process.

### Theme 1: shared culture and values

One of the primary issues international media focused on when covering the SB was the cultivation of values and cultures in American life. The theme captures the variety

of events associated with the SB and with the USA through five subthemes: (a) Culture and Capitalism, (b) Shared Experience, (c) Fashion and Lifestyle, (d) National Pride, and (e) State of the Country. Almost every news outlet extensively covered the variety of culturally associated activities, including musical performances and even poetry (CNA Sport 2021; Lee and Horton 2021). Yet, beyond the artistic displays, much of the coverage emphasized the connection between American culture and consumption and capitalism, especially through the 5.5 million-per 30 s Super Bowl ads that included A-list celebrities, promoted movies and tv shows, and paraphrased famous songs by Shaggy and Dolly Parton (Coetzee 2021; Hurley 2021; Lee and Horton 2021; Sng 2021). TikTok sponsoring the pre-game tailgate party in which Miley Cyrus performed and the SB Pepsi Halftime Show headlined by The Weeknd are also examples of such intersection between culture and capitalism in America. A uniquely American phenomenon that Hopsicker and Dyreson (2017) define as a celebration of "conspicuous consumption." The second subtheme "American Collectivism" focused on the shared experiences around the SB, in a country that is associated with freedom and individualism (Martin 2007). For example, the ratings the SB will receive in the USA, the gathering around food and especially chicken wings, consumption of alcohol, and sharing a collective experience through parties or even through social media reactions and viral memes (Lee and Horton 2021; Trends Desk 2021).



**Table 2** The coding of the data into themes, subthemes, and categories

| Themes                    | Subthemes                         | Categories   |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Shared culture and values | Culture and capitalism            | Art; celebrities; music; movies and TV; money and culture; commercialization                             |
|                           | Shared experience                 | Collective experience; food; alcohol; social media reactions; American lifestyle; ratings; common ideals |
|                           | Fashion and lifestyle             | Fashion; tom Brady's lifestyle   |
|                           | National pride                    | American patriotism; the presidency; heroism; American symbols and institutions                          |
| Sociopolitical climate    | State of the country              | The future; nostalgia; the attack on the capitol; state of America                                       |
|                           | Diversity and equity              | Native Americans; Race; Gender; Diversity issues   |
|                           | Activism and social justice       | International protest; criticism on the NFL; social justice; immigration; social activism                |
| The pandemic              | Different impacts of the pandemic | Commercialization of the pandemic; health workers; COVID   |
|                           | Criticism over the pandemic       | Mishandling the pandemic; the super bowl becoming a super spreader                                       |
| The event                 | Applicable storylines             | Old vs new narrative; goat; supporting narratives  |
|                           | The athletic competition          | Previews, play-by-play descriptions, reactions, and analysis of the football game                        |
| Positionality             | Us and the event                  | Experiencing the super bowl abroad; American football and us; super bowl and us; competing events        |
|                           | Others' social identity           | Canadian pride; international appropriations; Belize collective identity                                 |
|                           | Place branding                    | Tourism and travel; Norway   |

The third theme captures the perception of the American lifestyle, especially with glamorous descriptions of Tom Brady's life outside football, or through references to fashion.

In past SB games there was much focus on armed forces (Hopsicker 2017), in SBLV, health workers were honored as national heroes, including by having thousands of vaccinated health workers attending the SB. President Joe Biden thanked them in a message before the game, and African American female poet Amanda Gorman read the poem she wrote: "Chorus of the Captains," saying: "For while we honour them today, it is they who every day honour us" (CNA Sport 2021). In the fifth and last subtheme, state of the country, the current situation of America is discussed in international media, including the attack on the Capitol and the overall gloomy situation after a tough year full of death and social unrest. A Jeep commercial starring Bruce Springsteen reflected on the divisive state of the country trying to find the middle (Lee and Horton 2021). The BBC (2021) framed the decision to have country singer Eric Church sing the national anthem together with R&B singer Jazmine Sullivan as "a genre cross that serves as yet another NFL message of American unity." The coverage of the ads reflected the current state of America, for not focusing on the present but going either to nostalgia to the 1990s bringing back Wayne's World and Edward Scissorhands (Sng 2021) or contrary to that, fast-forwarding to the future and winning trip to space from SpaceX (BBC, 2021). The combination between darkness, the past, and the future (Moran 2021; Courtney 2021) manifested through the coverage of the half-time show. Moran (2021) wrote about The Weeknd's show

in the Sydney Morning Herald: "If his intent was to evoke America's ongoing end-times scenario, he succeeded."

## Theme 2: sociopolitical climate

The cultivation of American values and American culture discussed in theme 1 could not be fully understood in vacuum, without the context of sociopolitical climate in which they manifest. Throughout the coverage of SBLV, international media focused on issues related to social, political, and economic issues, through two subthemes: (a) diversity and inclusion, and (b) activism and social justice. Most international media organizations reported about diversity-related issues mostly in the contexts of gender and race. Example including celebrating the first two female coaches winning the SB as the first female referee in the SB breaking gender barriers, or focusing on African American Amanda Gorman reading poetry, mentioning Kamala Harris elected as Vice President and all-black coordinators in Tampa Bay's coaching staff (Collins 2021; Singer 2021). Perhaps the most inclusive angle was the focus on Toyota's commercial and the real-life story of double-amputee swimmer Jessica Long who was adopted from a Siberian orphanage (Lee and Horton 2021), and through grit and resilience became one of America's greatest Paralympic champions winning 13 gold medals. Such a story portrayed the USA as diverse in terms of gender, ableism, and place of birth. Yet, while such coverage presented the USA in a positive light, other articles also focused on racism and discrimination, such as focusing on the name Kansas City Chiefs being "hurtful and inappropriate to Indigenous Peoples" (Ram 2021). International media



also covered the lack of diversity in black NFL coaches (Felt and Lutz 2021). The mixed coverage of diversity might enhance the reputation of Brand America (Martin 2007) as a land of opportunities, but also the image of Americans as insensitive.

The social climate in America, including the kneeling of Colin Kaepernick and the change of heart by the NFL following the Black Lives Matters protests after the death of George Floyd, led to several critical articles and columns about activism and social injustice (Abdul-Jabbar 2021; Campbell 2021). Former NBA legend and social activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (2021) wrote an article in *The Guardian* in which he discussed the role of an athlete as a social activist, including posing the question regarding the legacy of Tom Brady, who sidestepped the issue of activism in 2014 but was more outspoken after the events of the summer of 2020. When covering Brady's achievements, *The Irish Times* published an article written by the *New York Times* (Shpigel 2021) about Brady's legacy, also mentioning the quarterback had a Make America Great Again hat in his locker room in 2015 when playing in New England and saying his relationship with Donald Trump became "uncomfortable." Morgan Campbell (2021) from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) criticized the NFL for framing the story of African American Kenny Washington who played in the league in 1946 as "reckoning with race." He wrote that the NFL was concerned about "rehabbing the league's image," while not diving into "confronting the ugly history" (Campbell, 2021). Campbell argues that while the league tried to project a progressive image, through his short career Washington faced racism. "Washington's experience contradicts the myth that racism recedes with time," he writes (Campbell, 2021).

Furthermore, Campbell (2021) goes further pointing out a glass ceiling for African Americans seeking the head coaching position, and especially questions ethical practices in the NFL in relation to concussions which leads to cognitive decline and head trauma. That was not the only time international coverage questioned the ethics of the sport. When reviewing the tradition of pre-Super Bowl presidential interviews, *The Indian Express* wrote "Donald Trump confessed he would have a 'hard time' letting son Barron play American football, alluding to the "dangerous sport's" link to brain trauma" (Bhatt 2021). Yet, Campbell (2021) focuses on the impact on African Americans, using the term "race norming" while citing a story covered by ABC News:

ABC News reported that several doctors in charge of assessing players for the cognitive decline that could qualify them for settlement money had grown frustrated with NFL guidelines they say made them factor a patient's race into test scores. The practice, known as "race norming," was invented as a way to avoid

over-diagnosing Black students as learning-disabled, correcting for the segregated, under-resourced schools they might have attended. But doctors mentioned in the ABC report complain that the practice handicaps Black patients' test scores. It's tougher to argue NFL-related head trauma caused low scores when race norming suggest Black people are prone to score poorly anyway, and the uncertainty can limit Black players' access to settlement cash. (Campbell, 2021)

### Theme 3: the pandemic

International media did not only focus on the sociopolitical climate in the USA, but also on the impact of the global pandemic that cost the lives of millions around the world and hundreds of thousands in the USA and forced countries to cancel or postpone sports events. SBLV was one of the most-watched sports events organized during the COVID19 and the pandemic was in the front-end or the background of the coverage of almost every aspect of the event. The coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in relation to SBLV was coded into two main subthemes: (a) different impacts of the pandemic and (b) criticism over the pandemic. International media covered extensively how the USA managed to organize the SB, having an attendance of 25,000 fans in the stadium including 7,500 health workers who received free tickets, and filling 30,000 seats with 25,000 cutout fans (Collins 2021). The pre-game tailgate party headlined by Miley Cyrus in front of vaccinated healthcare workers, and the singer herself became emotional while singing her hit "Wrecking Ball" (RTE 2021). COVID restrictions were also mentioned around the players' bubble, precautions taken after players were exposed to a positive-tested barber (Collins 2021), and that the Weeknd was the only artist in the halftime show without fans on the field (Trends Desk 2021). Furthermore, some international media outlets that used to cover the SB from the press-box in the stadium did not travel to Tampa, a significantly lower number of out-of-state visitors attended the game or the hosting city, with fewer surrounding events taking place or being replaced by virtual experiences (Collins 2021). When covering the commercials, international media reported that companies are spending less, not at all, or focusing on vaccine awareness (CBC 2021a, b). One ad that used the pandemic to promote its products was Seltzer Lemonade with a "not-so-subtle nod to the plans that were derailed during 2020 and the axiom 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.'" (Loop Entertainment 2021). Yet, international media also focused on the death toll of over 400,000 people killed by the coronavirus in the USA (Lee and Horton 2021) and on people in Tampa celebrating together not wearing masks or social distancing fearing the SB will become a coronavirus super spreader event (CBC News 2021a, b).





#### Theme 4: the event

Unlike the first three themes that focused on social, political, and economic issues around the SB, the fourth theme captured how international media portrayed the event as the championship game of a sports competition. The first sub-theme focused on the coverage of the athletic competition between two competitive teams including previews, play-by-play descriptions, pre-game and post-game interviews, statistical analysis, and so on. The second subtheme focused on applicable narratives that sports fans can relate to, regardless of the athletic discipline. The repeated storyline around SBLV was old vs new and the battle of generations between two quarterbacks, the 43 years old Tom Brady and 25 years old Patrick Mahomes (Smale 2021a). Such a narrative was relatable, as in any sport and in any culture, there are generational transitions. The second repeating narrative was the references to Tom Brady as the GOAT—the greatest of all time—through constant comparisons not just to American football players, but also to dominant athletes in other sports such as Michael Jordan in basketball, Serena Williams in tennis, or comparisons to top veteran soccer players such as Leo Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo (Higham 2021; Lutton 2021). Such comparisons also provide sports fans a relatable debate, increasing the drama and interest around the storyline of the competition. Other supportive narratives included Rob Gronkowski coming back from retirement to join Brady and win a SB, Tampa Bay playing the championship match on their home field, and the assistant coach and son of the head coach of Kansas City missing the game due to a car accident (Connolly et al 2021).

#### Theme 5. positionality

While the first four themes identified in the study analyzed how international media sees America, the fifth theme captured how other countries are positioned in comparison with America, also giving an introspection of how international media sees their country in relation to America and how international media portrayed the way America and Americans see others. The fifth theme captured how other countries are positioned in relation to the SB through three identified subthemes: (a) us and the event, (b) others' social identity, and (c) place branding. In the first subtheme, us and the event, international media focused on how to experience the SB abroad, where and when to watch around the world in Nigeria (Chukwu 2021), South Africa (Richardson 2021), New Zealand (NZ Herald 2021), Australia (Smale 2021b), or Great Britain (Higham 2021), how to “go all-American” (RTE Lifestyle 2021) and hold virtual SB parties in Ireland, instructions on household gatherings and limitations of outdoor watching of the game in Canada (Djuric 2021), and competing sport-events occurring during that weekend such

as England competing in cricket games (Felt and Lutz 2021) or the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. Furthermore, as American football was developed out of soccer and rugby, and several English-speaking countries are former British colonies that are influenced by British sports or British colonialism (Krechmar et al 2017; Woods and Butler 2021), international media also made comparisons to local sports and culture. For example, comparing the NFL to the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia (Masters 2021), local American football variations such as flag football in New Zealand (Egan 2021) or being described as “similar to soccer but played differently” (Kaieteur News 2021a, b) in Guyana—the only English-speaking country in South America. Campbell (2021) compares the lack of racial diversity in American football to similar history in Canadian hockey. Yet, perhaps the most comprehensive article of analyzing a country in relation to American football was written by Connor Neville (2021) about Ireland, including the history of covering the SB, in relation to local sports such as Gaelic football, the history of violence in soccer, and even playing the American version of the game and holding an “inaugural Shamrock Bowl.”

The second subtheme pertained to social identity and the spotlight international media put on their citizens playing a role in the SB. Canadian national pride was manifested several times through the framing (McCombs and Shaw 1972) of The Weeknd being the first Canadian solo artist to headline the SB halftime show. According to the CBC, Toronto Mayor even declared February 7 being declared The Weeknd Day, saying: “Toronto is proud that one of its own, The Weeknd, has achieved such enormous popularity both here at home and on the world stage” (Lau 2021). Canadian media also emphasized local pride by reporting Canadian Kansas City Chiefs player opting out of the season to work on the COVID19 crisis in Quebec and on Quebec-born Antony Auclair from Tampa Bay being the 17th Canadian to appear in the SB (Steuter-Martin 2021). Similarly, media outlets in Belize focused on Rakeem Nunez Roches becoming the first Garifuna Belizean American to win a Super Bowl (Ramos 2021). In a demonstration of a shared collective identity (David and Bar-Tal 2009), Ramos (2021) writes “we should all be happy for him.” Yet, collective identity and national pride in the SB manifested also off the field of play, including through commercials. In the most political manifestation of collective identity and global affairs, Indian Americans used a crowdfunding campaign to broadcast a Super Bowl ad in California to raise awareness of the farmers' protest in India (PTI 2021). The ad, which also includes a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. and the Mayor of the city of Fresno, focuses on farmers camping at several Delhi border points “demanding the government to repeal the three farm laws” (PTI 2021). The lighter Cheetos commercial featured real-life celebrity couple Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis along



with Jamaican artist Shaggy, paraphrasing his iconic song “It Wasn’t Me” (Hurley 2021; The Gleaner 2021), was a source of pride in both New Zealand and Jamaica. While media outlets in New Zealand celebrated the creativity of “the Kiwis who wrote the Cheetos Super Bowl ad” (Hurley 2021), the Jamaican media celebrated “The Boombastic singer” (The Gleaner 2021) being a global superstar.

The third subtheme of positionality pertains to place branding. One form of place branding through the commercial ads was through General Motors (GM) cars and comedian Will Ferrell portraying Norway as the leading country in the world in electric cars per capita (Lee and Horton 2021). The San Pedro Sun (2021) reported that after Belizean American player Rakeem Nunez Roches won the SB, Belize Tourism Board (TBT) tweeted “‘the Minister of Tourism and Diaspora Relations look forward to welcoming you to Belize,’ tagging Rakeem and Brady” (The San Pedro Sun 2021), referencing reports that the offered vacation would be on the expense of BTB. These are all examples of how countries use the SB and its related activities and events to leverage their brands as a tourism destination or how companies are using the country images of different countries to enhance their brands.

## Discussion

The study aims to explore and analyze the projected image of the United States through international media coverage of SBLV, and based on the thematic analysis, the findings suggest a complex projected image. From agenda-setting perspectives (Entman 1993) by emphasizing the cultural significance of the SB, including the musical performances and creative commercials, international media told its audience these aspects of America were worth focusing on. From framing lenses (McCombs and Shaw 1972) through international media projected a variety of power struggles resulting in mixed messages about diversity, racism, and handling the pandemic. To analyze the significance of the findings on country image, nation branding, sports, and the

USA, the study uses theories suggested through Buhmann and Ingenhoff’s (2015) 4D country image model, followed by the analysis of the different uses of the SB through nation branding lenses (Fan 2010).

### The image of the USA

To answer the research question about the projected image of the USA through international coverage of SBLV, the study uses Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) model that analyzes a country’s image through functional, esthetic, normative, and sympathetic dimensions. Table 3 summarizes the projected image of the United States through Buhmann and Ingenhoff’s (2015) 4D country image model.

The functional dimension of a country analyzes the abilities, competencies, and success of a country (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). On one hand, the functional dimension of the USA received positive coverage for being able to hold a mega event during the pandemic. However, there was also much international criticism, focusing on over 400,000 deaths in the USA, and on fear the SB will become a super spreader. Such critics enhance the reputation of Americans being selfish (Martin 2007). The functional dimension also refers to the economic attributes of the country and its political organization (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). On one hand, the American high-technological industry receives international exposure including the initiatives of SpaceX (Courtney 2021), yet on the other hand, the implications of the storm of the Capitol cast a shadow on America’s functional dimension. The ample articles and mentioning of the commercials reinforce the role of capitalism in Brand America (Martin 2007) framing the American economy as strong and functioning. Mentioning the speeches by President Joe Biden, the inauguration, and the democratic institutions of the American system also help to portray the country as functioning.

The most positive framing of America occurred focused on the esthetic dimension of the country “that is its beauty and attractiveness as a cultural and scenic place” (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015, p. 114). Through the coverage,

**Table 3** The projected image of the USA during the coverage of SBLV through the 4D county image model (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015)

| Country image dimension | Projected image of the USA   |
|-------------------------|--|
| Functional              | High developed technology and industry; ability to complete an NFL season and to host the SB during the pandemic; limited ability to protect society from COVID  |
| Esthetic                | Rich culture including music, sports, art, television and films, and celebrities; creative; having collective traditions; attractive scenery; active nightlife   |
| Normative               | Diversity in sports; issues of racism in society; prioritizing individualism and commercialism over people’s health and even human lives; unauthentic messages; care for health workers; divided country |
| Sympathetic             | Fascination with American culture and sports; imitating American parties and traditions; criticism on American priorities  |



international media celebrated American culture by mentioning dozens of celebrities, discussing in-depth the creative ads, analyzing the traditional halftime show while also recalling previous performances, and even pointing out the uniqueness of having poetry in the SB. Perhaps the most significant demonstration of the intersection between sports and culture for nation branding and public diplomatic purposes occurs during the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games (Arning 2013). Nye (2008) identifies culture as a critical component for effective soft power and the extensive international coverage of the cultural events and traditions around the SB and emphasizes the appeal of American cultural diplomacy, enhancing the esthetic component in the USA's country image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). According to David and Bar-Tal (2009), national identity includes shared history and culture among other characteristics. According to Hopsicker (2017), the SB plays a role in creating American nationalism. The subtheme nation pride pertains to different manifestations of American patriotism including different traditions such as presidential speeches and interviews, the playing of the national anthem and "America the Beautiful," and other American symbols and institutions associated with the coverage of the SB. When covering SBLV, along covering the repeating traditions, international also emphasized the diverse musical genres of R&B and country when playing the national anthem and the consumption of food and good, adding to Hopsicker and Dyreson (2017) definition of the SB being a celebration of "conspicuous consumption." The competition itself also has cultural value. With sports being a subset of culture (Dubinsky 2019), having competitive interesting leagues increases the esthetic dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) of a country. Furthermore, the focus on applicable narratives such as new vs old or who is the GOAT makes the SB a relatable drama that adds value to the esthetic dimension of the hosting country.

While America's esthetic dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) is being portrayed as rich and diverse and added to the association of Brand America with capitalism (Martin 2007), the country's normative dimension was much more scrutinized. The normative dimension covers beliefs regarding the integrity of a country, its values, and norms (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). The mentioning of the attack on the US Capitol, the analysis of racial injustice in American, the reporting on ignoring health guidelines, and the focus on unethical practices in the sports of football all pose a question mark regarding the ethics and values of America especially with the lack of care for people's safety and human lives. Such framing supports Dubinsky's (2021) analysis of the role of sports during the Trump presidency that Brand America has questionable values. By focusing on racism and on questioning the ethics and norms of the most popular sport in America, emphasizing that even a

Republican president would feel uncomfortable having his son playing, and casting doubt on the authenticity of the league's communication, the normative dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) of USA's image is portrayed mostly negatively by international media. The USA was also framed as a country mishandling the global pandemic and not learning from its mistakes after hundreds of thousands of deaths. Such priorities also project on the normative dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) of the country. With that said, the criticism was also moderate. International media did not focus on the exploitation of African American college athletes who generate billions without being able to get compensated (Silva et al. 2020). Although questioning the authenticity of the NFL's messages for "rehabbing the league's image" (Campbell 2021) international media did not use the term "sports washing" which is used for describing mostly non-democratic countries for using sports to launder their images from being associated with human rights violations (CNN 2020). Furthermore, there was also some positive coverage of American norms, by focusing on the inclusion of women in coaching positions and refereeing the SB, by Tampa Bay having black coordinators, and by honoring health workers as heroes. The international coverage of SBLV reflected a unique perspective of what America defines as heroism in 2021, different from the patriotic manifestations of after 9/11 or during the first Gulf War (Butterworth 2008; Hopsicker 2017) and perhaps shifting the militant image of America (Martin 2007; Nye 2019) to a more humanitarian one. With that said, international media also attacked the credibility of the sent messages sent around the SB. Thus, while honoring health workers with free tickets, concerts, and speeches, and a few hours later, people celebrating in the streets and bars without masks while hundreds of thousands of Americans died from the coronavirus, also shed doubt on the credibility of America and negatively portrays the US normative image.

While the functional, esthetic, and normative dimension constitutes the cognitive component of an attitude and the knowledge associated with a country's image, the sympathetic dimension contains the affective component of an attitude and the feelings and fascination toward a country's image (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). The five themes identified in the study indicate what international media was fascinated about when covering the SB including the (a) shared culture and values as manifested through the ample coverage of the musical performances, the creative ads, and the traditions around the game, (b) the sociopolitical climate including the coverage of racial issues America including in the context of football, (c) the pandemic including the impact on the organization, honoring health workers, but also mishandling the response and the enormous death toll, (d) the event and the storylines around the competition, and (e) positionality of the different countries in relation to the



SB, to America, or of America in relation to others. The projected image of America portrayed a divided society and a struggling country, clinging to nostalgia or imagining the future. Nye (2008) suggests the USA should re-invest in America's smart power trying to attract foreign audiences through culture. The coverage of SBLV demonstrates that despite Donald Trump's separatists and populist views and policies (Nye 2019), international media is still attracted to American culture. Whether the complex projected image will result in increased travel to the USA, purchasing American products, fascination with American culture, supporting a party aligning with America, or rejecting American values pertains to the behavioral components (Grewell and Levy 2021) of international audiences toward the image of America.

### Nation branding and sports during a pandemic

The second part of the analysis uses nation branding lenses to answer the research question on the projected image of the USA through international coverage of SBLV. While the first four themes focused on the image of the USA, the fifth theme, positionality, focuses on the coverage of how other countries see themselves in relation to the USA or the SB, or how the USA sees itself in relation to other countries. Fan (2010) argues that nation branding is analyzed through different perspectives: (a) export branding which in this study is also referred to as product-based branding, (b) place branding which in this study is also referred to as destination-based branding, (c) political branding in the form public diplomacy, and (d) cultural branding in the form of national identity. Table 4 exemplifies the use of SBLV for nation branding through the different lenses of product-based branding, destination-based branding, public diplomacy, and national identity.

Hosting mega sports events embody significant opportunities and risks through international media and tourists (Dubinsky 2019). The SB has an impact of hundreds of millions of dollars on the hosting city, mostly through out-of-city visitors (O'Reilly et al. 2008). Due to the pandemic,

much fewer international media came to cover the game, less than half of the stadiums were full, and fewer tourists came to the city, leading to a much different impact on the hosting city, including on its international exposure. Furthermore, the pandemic also had negative impact on travel, tourism, or airline ads. If in previous years Tourism Australia or Travel Ecuador (Marcus 2018) saw the SB as an attractive platform for destination branding that was not the case in 2021. Furthermore, even products associated with countries-of-origin such as Turkish Airlines or Avocados from Mexico (Dua 2020) did not have ads during SBLV. So, the manifestation of destination-based branding and product-based branding was different. In one example of destination-based branding, Belize Tourism Board tagging Rakeem Nunez Roches and Tom Brady while tweeting the minister welcomes them to Belize (The San Pedro Sun 2021). The ad by GM that portrayed Norway as a leader in electric cars (Lee and Horton 2021) applied both to products associated with the country and showed the country and other Scandinavian countries as attractive tourism destinations. Through the ad, not only the normative dimension of Norway is enhanced, but also the scenery of Scandinavian countries, adding to their esthetic components and to their value as a tourism destination.

Traditional definitions of public diplomacy refer mostly to communications with foreign publics (Cull 2008) linked to foreign policy goals. With the SB being a national competition, mostly watched by Americans (Vertelney 2018) and including different American traditions (Hopsicker and Dyreson 2017), most of the target audiences are Americans. With that said, there are also different diplomatic uses of the event, including an interview with US President Joe Biden and messages from the Biden and the First Lady about fighting a global pandemic. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the ample interest in the musical performances, the celebrities, and the creative commercials play a role in American cultural diplomacy and soft power (Nye 2008), that resembles performances in Olympic Games' ceremonies (Arning 2013). Another form of diplomacy during SBLV manifested through Indian Americans in California crowd-funding a commercial to raise awareness about social issues,

**Table 4** Examples of using SBLV for nation branding purposes

| Theoretical lenses         | Nation branding of the host  | Nation branding of other countries  |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Product-based branding     | High-level American technologies such as SpaceX  | Norway branded as environmentally friendly being a world leader in electric cars  |
| Destination-based branding | Celebrities, musicians, poets, and athletes promoting American culture                           | Belize Tourism Board tweeting about offering to welcome Rakeem Nunez Roches and Tom Brady   |
| Public diplomacy           | Kareem Abdul-Jabbar writing a column about American athletes' activism                           | People-to-people diplomacy through raising awareness to farmers protest in India  |
| National identity          | Using the anthem, presidential interviews, and salute to heroes to promote a collective identity | Canada celebrating The weeknd headlining the halftime show, and athletes playing in the SB or opting out to join healthcare workers |



and the social struggles of the farmers. That can also be seen as people-to-people diplomacy (Dubinsky 2019), adding both to the functional and normative dimensions (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015) of both India and the USA.

Unlike the traditional definition of public diplomacy that analyzes communications with foreign publics (Cull 2008), national identity also focuses on domestic public, creating different collective traditions, myths, and values (David and Bar-Tal 2009). The thematic analysis discussed in-depth the roles of the SB in American society, creating a collective image, adding to what Dyreson (2017) defines as “a beacon of American nationalism” (Dyreson 2017). However, the findings also demonstrate how the SB plays a role in other countries’ national identities. Examples include Canadian media celebrating The Weeknd being the first Canadian solo artists in the halftime show which adds to the esthetic dimension of the country or emphasizing a Canadian player opted-out of the season, prioritizing empathy and care, or competing for titles or receiving a large paycheck adding to the normative dimension of Canada in the eyes of Canadians and foreigners. Regarding national pride and sports, Canadian and Belizean media focusing on their players winning the SB demonstrate the importance of what Hobsbawm (1992) defines as “imagined communities,” with athletes representing the culture and values of entire nations. Figure 1 illustrates a model for nation branding and sports during a pandemic, based on the findings and discussion of the study.

Based on the themes that emerged from the data as portrayed in Table 2, and in relation to the different nation branding lenses as discussed by Fan (2010) and other authors as seen in Table 4, and correlation with Buhmann and Ingenhoff’s (2015) 4D country image model expressed in Table 3, the study suggests the model above as a blueprint to analyze the use of sports for nation branding purposes during the COVID19 pandemic. The model suggests

that each lens of nation branding (product-based branding, destination-based branding, public diplomacy, and national identity) needs to be evaluated through the different themes that emerged from the study (the pandemic, sociopolitical climate, shared culture and values, the event, and positionality) and the outcome on the perceived image of the country should be evaluated through one or all the four dimensions (functional, esthetic, normative, and sympathetic). Countries, cities, communities, and other stakeholders who strive to improve their images should consider this model when using sports for nation branding during the COVID19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

This study analyzed the projected image of the USA through international coverage of SBLV. Based on the thematic analysis of the finding, the study suggests that international audiences are fascinated by American culture as portrayed in the esthetic dimension (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015), but are critical about the ethical norms of the country relating to race and human lives and with the functionality of the country mishandling the pandemic. The five themes identified in this study (the pandemic, sociopolitical climate, shared culture and values, the event, and positionality) all add to the three cognitive dimensions and to the affective sympathetic dimension of the complex image of America. The study used different lenses of nation branding (Fan 2010) in the context of the USA and other countries and the SB including product-based branding, destination-based branding, public diplomacy, and national identity. Based on the findings and the theoretical and conceptual analysis, the study suggests a model for countries seeking to use sports for nation branding during the COVID19 pandemic.

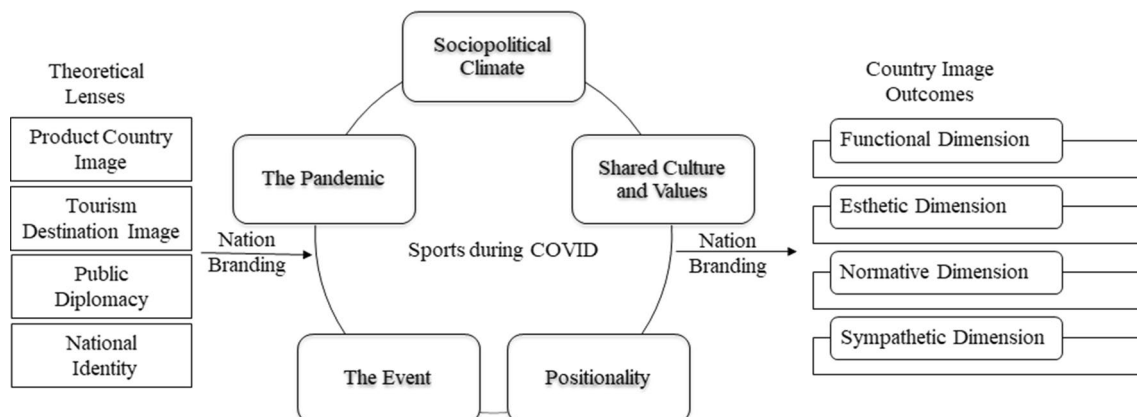


Fig. 1 Nation branding and sports during the COVID19 pandemic



The study has several limitations and delimitations. Due to language barriers, the study followed the coverage of the SB only in countries where English is an official spoken language and only through online national media outlets between February 5 and February 9. Coverage in non-English-speaking countries and especially non-Western countries which have not been impacted by British culture or British colonialism (Krechmar et al 2017) might portray a different image of America. Furthermore, coverage in sports-designated websites, in non-digital mediums or media outlets, or beyond the five-day window of this study, might have also been different than in the articles analyzed. The novelty of the study is that it focuses on international media, yet as a result it does not claim to suggest what is the projected image of the USA through domestic American media, nor does it analyze attitudes of readers toward America. These would require different research designs. Furthermore, although the SB draws some international attention, it is still mostly an American-oriented event (Vertelney 2018; Woods and Butler 2021). By focusing on more global and international events such as the Olympic Games, studies might identify more or different manifestations of nation branding during the pandemic.

The study is significant for both theorists and practitioners. As previously mentioned, the study enriches existing literature on sports and the image of Brand America (Martin 2007) by focusing on the projection of America through international media which fills a gap in existing literature. Furthermore, the study analyzes one of the first mega-events during Joe Biden's administration, shortly after the attack on the Capitol and amid COVID19, which makes the case of SBLV unprecedented and unique. The study also suggests a model future hosts and non-hosting countries should consider as using sports for nation branding during the pandemic. Future research should continue to fill some of the gaps identified and discussed in this study, by analyzing the image of America in more countries, through more news outlets, over a longer period, and measuring attitudes to get a more holistic international image. Future studies should also analyze future SB games and testing and furthering the suggested model for countries using sports for nation branding during the COVID19 pandemic.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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