

Sport mega-events, visitor experience and nation brand capital: evidence from AFCON 2025 in Morocco

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Abstract

Sport mega-events are widely promoted as accelerators of nation brand equity, yet the mechanism that converts event visibility into durable brand capital remains poorly specified, particularly for emerging economies. This study tests a sequential mediation model SPME→EXP→IMG/CRED→INT in which a perceived sport and mega-event lever (SPME) shapes the lived experience of international visitors (EXP), which in turn feeds two parallel cognitive pathways: perceived national image (IMG) and perceived institutional credibility (CRED), both hypothesized to drive positive behavioural intentions (INT) toward the host nation. Data were collected from 314 international visitors present in Morocco during the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4, with confirmatory factor analysis cross-validation in AMOS 27 and 5,000-replication bootstrapping. Six of eight hypotheses were supported. Lived experience emerged as the central activation mechanism, and national image predicted behavioural intentions far more strongly than institutional credibility, which exerted no direct effect (H5 rejected). Sport retained a residual direct effect on intentions, indicating partial rather than full mediation. We introduce the Post-Event Leveraging Gap (PELG) to theories why visibility peaks fail to translate automatically into measurable brand gains. The findings reframe visitor experience as a sustainable intangible legacy and offer a diagnostic logic for Morocco's positioning ahead of the 2030 FIFA World Cup.

Keywords: sport mega-events; nation branding; visitor experience; sustainable event legacy; AFCON 2025; Morocco

1. Introduction

Host nations pour billions into sport mega-events on a simple premise: global visibility will reset how the world sees them. The assumption regarding the association between hosting a major sporting event and sustaining long-lasting nation brand equity is much weaker than has generally been recognized (Grix et al., 2015; Manfred & Preuss, 2020). In the policy literature, it is often implied that media exposure alone will be sufficient to engender positive perceptions of a host country, enhance its reputation and thus lead to the commercial benefits associated with having a strong nation brand. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult to accept. Overall, the evidence shows that there is tenuous empirical support linking exposure and brand equity, in particular, the positive benefits of hosting an event diminish immediately after the event concludes, and many host countries experience increased levels of attention without translating this into any measurable increase in their brand equity (Preuss, 2015; Florek & Insch, 2020).

From the preceding discussion, it is quite clear that place branding will benefit from enhanced levels of attention that result from having hosted major sporting events. The challenge is understanding the processes and conditions under which the enhanced levels of attention

achieved by hosting major sporting events will result in nation brand equity that lasts well beyond the actual event. Emerging economies face a particularly acute challenge because a successful mega-event represents a concentrated opportunity to compress years, if not decades, of building a positive reputation into one cycle. The cost of mishandling this is higher for emerging than developed economies, particularly because, when the visibility of the event diminishes, emerging economies lack the extensive networks of established tourism associations to leverage. The Atlas Lions' semi-final run at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar generated a huge, globally broadcast spike of attention; how little and how unevenly that translated into brand gains is the puzzle this study sets out to explain.

Our argument is that the missing link is experiential, not informational. Building on event leveraging theory (Chalip, 2006; Chalip, 2004) and on work about visitor experience at sport events (Gibson et al., 2012), we propose that mega-events build brand capital mainly through the quality of the lived experience they give international visitors, not through media exposure on its own. Experience is what turns a passing spectacle into encoded, emotionally charged impressions of the host country. To test this, we specify and estimate a sequential mediation model: a perceived sport and mega-event lever (SPME) shapes lived experience (EXP), which then feeds two parallel cognitive routes, perceived national image (IMG) and perceived institutional credibility (CRED), and these are expected to drive positive behavioural intentions (INT) toward the host nation, our way of operationalizing nation brand equity.

The sustainability stakes are immediate. Event scholars increasingly separate the durable, intangible legacies of mega-events from their physical infrastructure, and note that the intangible ones often last longer and do more for long-term value than the concrete and steel (Thomson et al., 2019; Smith, 2012). Once a good visitor experience is encoded as a favorable image and passed on through word of mouth and return visits, it becomes a reputational asset that renews itself instead of depreciating the way a stadium or a rail link does. Framing the leveraging question in experiential terms therefore lines mega-event strategy up with sustainable development: it moves the emphasis off one-off capital spending and onto an intangible legacy that can be sustained, compounded and switched back on across successive events. For an emerging economy preparing for 2030, brand capital built through sport could be a durable competitive advantage, but only if the host can close the gap between visibility and conversion.

The article offers three contributions. First, drawing on a multinational sample of 314 visitors surveyed during AFCON 2025, it gives PLS-SEM evidence that what links sport to brand intentions is experiential activation, not exposure. It first shows that a national image predicts behavioural expectations through the national image instead of through institutional credibility. This means that institutional credibility is building the national image rather than driving behavioural expectations directly. Second, it introduces what will be referred to throughout this article as the Post-Event Leveraging Gap (PELG), which is defined as the strategic and temporal difference between where a mega-event creates visibility peak for a national brand and where the institution's ability to utilize the visibility of that event to create sustainable brand equity has occurred. In this way, PELG functions as both a concept and as a diagnostic measure.

As will be demonstrated in the remainder of the article, the paper continues with the theoretical development of PELG, including eight working hypotheses; discusses the methodology used for collecting and analyzing data; provides a report of the structural and measurement results; discusses those results; and concludes with management

recommendations for the implementation of PELG to Morocco in efforts to reach the goal of being a top 20 tourism destination by 2030.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Nation Branding Through Sport

The concept of Nation branding is based upon the belief that the country represents a management asset as it relates to how others perceive the value of that country. A country may have many different characteristics that contribute to its overall reputation but all these channels can be affected by how one chooses to manage them (Anholt, 2005; Anholt, 2007). The hexagon created by Anholt is a visual representation of how six major channels represent the country's reputation; these channels are tourism, export, governance, investment & immigration, culture & heritage, and people. Anholt concludes that the competitive identity of countries will be derived from managing these channels in unison rather than managing them individually through the communication channel (Anholt, 2005; Anholt, 2007). Sport sits awkwardly across the hexagon. It is at once a cultural product, a draw for tourism and a signal of how well a state runs things, and that is exactly what makes a mega-event such a concentrated branding instrument. A single tournament can light up several of those channels at once, packing into a few weeks the kind of multi-channel exposure a country would normally build up over years.

Nation brand equity, the asset this study ultimately seeks to explain, is the differential value that accrues to a country by virtue of its name and associations, paralleling the customer-based brand equity construct imported from product and destination marketing (Boo et al., 2009; Pike & Bianchi, 2016). In destination contexts, this equity is most commonly operationalized through awareness, image, perceived quality and loyalty, with behavioural loyalty revisit and recommendation intention treated as the construct's behavioural expression and its most policy-relevant indicator (Zhang et al., 2014; Boo et al., 2009). We adopt this convention, modelling positive behavioural intentions as the observable manifestation of accumulated nation brand capital. This choice has an important methodological consequence: it locates the dependent variable at the point where reputational value becomes behaviour, allowing the model to trace how an upstream event lever propagates all the way to the intentions that produce tourism receipts, return visitation and advocacy.

The research regarding nation branding via sporting events has shifted from just outlining image impacts (appearance) to a wider strategic question: in what ways can host countries use these events creatively to develop their national identity (Knott et al., 2015)? Knott, Fyall and Jones argue that the branding value of hosting is never automatic. It depends on whether the host can attach lasting national meaning to the event and turn the global stage into a vehicle for a coherent national story (Knott et al., 2015). Richelieu's diamond model of place branding through sport takes this further, naming the actors and assets, teams, athletes, federations, public authorities and the emotional capital of fans, whose alignment decides whether sport converts into place equity (Richelieu, 2018). Both frameworks point the same way: the branding payoff from a mega-event depends on intermediary mechanisms that link the event to perception, and those mechanisms can work or fail regardless of how visible the event was.

2.2. Sport Event Leveraging

Event leveraging theory provides the strategic vocabulary for those intermediary mechanisms. Chalip reframes the analytical question away from the ex-post measurement of impacts toward the ex-ante design of strategies that maximize the benefits a host extracts from an event (Chalip, 2006; Chalip, 2004). Leverage treats the event as seed capital to be worked rather than as an

outcome to be tallied. The social and experiential side of an event, what Chalip (2004) calls its celebratory, liminal atmosphere, is not a by-product but a strategic asset that can be cultivated for value beyond the contest itself. This is why we treat the sport and mega-event lever (SPME) as a perceived condition that acts on visitors through the experiences it enables rather than through exposure. Across the leveraging literature, the gap between potential and realized benefits turns out to be institutional and temporal. Benefits fade quickly unless someone actively converts them, and most hosts fall short in the post-event period, once attention recedes and the work shifts from spectacle to follow-through (Preuss, 2015; Thomson et al., 2019).

That post-event period is what the Post-Event Leveraging Gap refers to: leverage belongs to the host's capacity to act after the cameras leave, not to the event itself. For emerging economies, the problem is sharper. These hosts have to set a transitional, newly visible nation apart from a low or contested reputational base (Rein & Shields, 2007), so the event works less as reinforcement of an established brand than as a first deposit. They have to hold attention and, at the same time, build the cognitive and affective associations the brand will rest on, often against existing stereotypes or simple information gaps (Heslop et al., 2010; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). The familiar call to favour strategy over spectacle therefore carries extra weight here, since the conversion work is constructive rather than merely reinforcing.

2.3. Visitor Experience at Sport Events

If leverage works through experience, then experience has to carry real weight in the model. Gibson, Kaplanidou and Kang (2012) show that how good a visitor's experience is at a sport event affects their later attitudes and their intentions toward the host country. Experience, in other words, mediates the effect; it is not where the process stops. And it is not one thing. The spectacle on the pitch, the host environment, the people a visitor meets, the mood of the crowd all fold into a single impression. That impression is what a visitor takes home and repeats to others, and it is what an image of the country gets built from later, far from where the event took place.

Two cognitive consequences of experience sit at the center of our model. The first is perceived national image (IMG), the cognitive and affective picture of the host country that visitors revise in light of what they actually experienced (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Zhang et al., 2014). Destination image research keeps finding that image is a close antecedent of behavioural intentions like returning and recommending (Zhang et al., 2014). The second is perceived institutional and organisational credibility (CRED), the visitor's read on whether the host is competent, reliable and able to deliver, signaled by how well the event itself is run. Credibility is a trust judgment, and work on signalling and reputation suggests that visible organisational competence can color broader perceptions of a country's reliability (Anholt, 2007; Fombrun et al., 2000). Separating the two routes, an affective-evaluative image route and a competence-based credibility route, lets the model test whether they feed intentions equally or sit at different points in the causal chain.

Signalling theory helps explain why credibility belongs in the model at all. A well-run mega-event is an expensive signal, and an expensive signal is hard to fake. A visitor sees how the event actually performs: whether the transport works, whether the venues feel safe, whether the hospitality holds up. None of that can be produced by communication alone, and that is precisely what gives it evidential weight (Fombrun et al., 2000; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). Yet signalling theory also predicts that the value of a signal depends on how the receiver integrates it into an overall judgment, and there is no guarantee that a competence signal feeds directly into behaviour rather than being absorbed into a broader evaluative impression. This is

precisely the empirical question the dual pathway poses, and it foreshadows why the credibility route may behave differently from the image route: competence may be read as evidence about the country without itself becoming the reason a visitor intends to return.

2.4. The SPME–EXP–IMG/CRED–INT Model and Hypotheses

Integrating the three streams yields a sequential mediation model. The perceived sport and mega-event lever (SPME) is the exogenous construct; lived experience (EXP) is the first-order mediator through which the lever acts; perceived national image (IMG) and perceived institutional credibility (CRED) are parallel second-order mediators; and positive behavioural intentions (INT) toward the host nation are the endogenous outcome, operationalizing nation brand equity in line with destination image theory's emphasis on intention as the behavioural expression of brand value (Zhang et al., 2014). Figure 1 presents the conceptual model and the eight hypothesized paths. The logic of the experiential route begins with the proposition that a stronger perceived lever generates a richer lived experience, because the strategic and atmospheric assets of the event are what visitors actually encounter:

H1. The perceived sport and mega-event lever (SPME) positively influence the lived experience of international visitors (EXP).

Lived experience then feeds the two cognitive pathways. A high-quality experience supplies the favorable, vivid material from which national image is reconstructed, and it simultaneously serves as direct evidence of organisational competence:

H2. Lived experience (EXP) positively influences perceived national image (IMG).

H3. Lived experience (EXP) positively influences perceived institutional credibility (CRED).

The model then posits that both cognitive mediators drive behavioural intentions, reflecting the dual perceptual pathway in which image and credibility each contribute to the visitor's disposition to return, recommend and invest reputationally in the host:

H4. Perceived national image (IMG) positively influences positive behavioural intentions (INT).

H5. Perceived institutional credibility (CRED) positively influences positive behavioural intentions (INT).

Because emotional attachment to sport may influence intentions through channels not captured by the cognitive mediators, we test for a residual direct effect, which—if significant—indicates partial rather than full mediation:

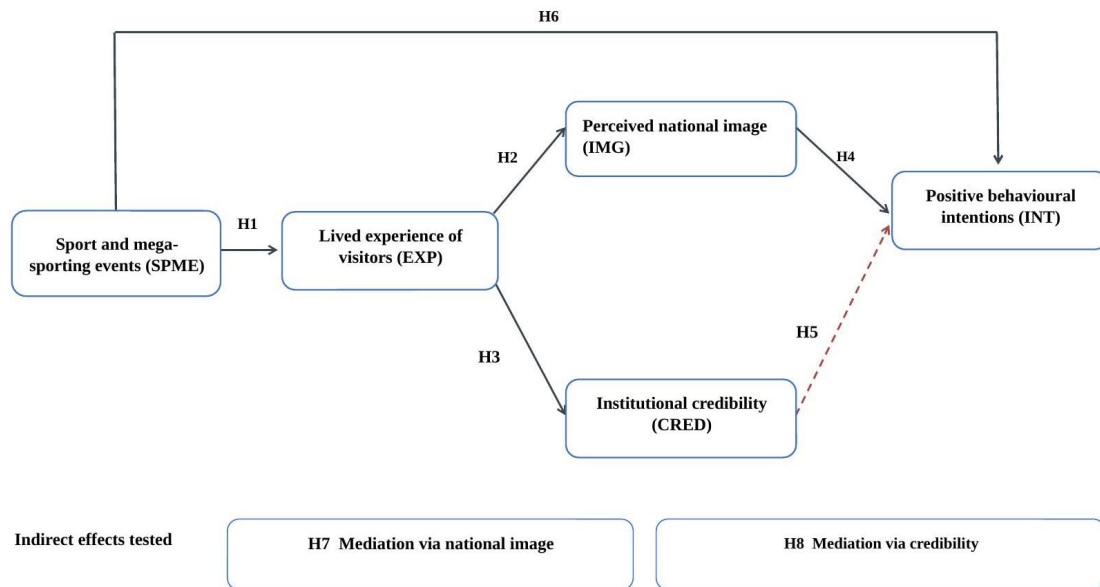
H6. The perceived sport and mega-event lever (SPME) exerts a residual direct effect on behavioural intentions (INT), net of the mediated pathways.

Finally, the two full sequential pathways are tested as indirect effects, distinguishing the image-mediated chain from the credibility-mediated chain:

H7. Lived experience and national image sequentially mediate the effect of SPME on behavioural intentions (SPME→EXP→IMG→INT).

H8. Lived experience and institutional credibility sequentially mediate the effect of SPME on behavioural intentions (SPME→EXP→CRED→INT).

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Source: Author

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Epistemological Positioning

The study adopts a post-positivist stance, treating the constructs as latent realities that can be approximated, never perfectly measured, through validated reflective indicators (Hair et al., 2019). It forms the quantitative phase of a broader sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (QUAN→QUAL); this article reports the quantitative phase exclusively. We collected primary data through a self-administered questionnaire and modelled the hypothesized relationships using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is appropriate here for three reasons: the model is complex and prediction-oriented, chaining four endogenous constructs; the focus is on explaining target construct variance and testing a theoretically novel mechanism rather than confirming an established covariance structure; and the construct scores feed directly into managerial and policy diagnostics, a use case for which PLS-SEM's predictive emphasis is well suited (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022). To guard against method-specific artefacts we cross-validated the measurement model with covariance-based confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 27, while the structural model was estimated in SmartPLS 4 with 5,000 bootstrap replications for the significance of direct and indirect effects.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The target population comprised international visitors physically present in Morocco during AFCON 2025. We used a non-probability sample, built from a mix of convenience and purposive selection. Data came from four kinds of site: event venues, international airports, hotels and the main tourist spots. A screening question kept the sample to non-resident international visitors who had actually attended the tournament or followed it closely. This multi-site approach produced a multinational sample of 314 valid responses, exceeding the minimum required by both the inverse-square-root and gamma-exponential power heuristics for the most complex regression in the model at conventional power (Hair et al., 2022). The sample was demographically diverse across nationality, age and gender, with sufficient representation of first-time and repeat visitors and of high- and low-sport-exposure segments

to support multi-group analysis. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed of the research purpose and their right to withdraw.

The multi-site collection protocol was designed to capture the visitor at different moments of the event journey rather than at a single touch-point, on the reasoning that experience is integrated across the venue, the host environment and the points of arrival and departure. Recruiting at airports and hotels alongside stadiums also reduced the over-representation of the most committed spectators that venue-only sampling tends to produce, broadening the sport-exposure spectrum and supporting the high- versus low-exposure comparison in the multi-group analysis. Responses were screened for completeness and for non-resident status, and straight-lining and implausibly short completion times were removed before the analytic sample of 314 was finalized.

3.3. Instrument and measures

All five constructs were measured reflectively with multi-item scales adapted from validated instruments in the nation branding, destination image, sport event leveraging and visitor experience literatures, with item wording refined for the AFCON context (Gibson et al., 2012; Anholt, 2005; Knott et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). SPME captured the perceived strength of the event as a strategic and atmospheric lever; EXP captured the integrated quality of the lived visitor experience; IMG captured the cognitive-affective image of Morocco; CRED captured perceived institutional and organisational competence and reliability; and INT captured behavioural intentions to return, recommend and speak favorably about Morocco. Items were scored on seven-point Likert scales. The questionnaire was prepared in multiple languages with back-translation to preserve semantic equivalence, and a pilot pre-test was used to verify clarity before full deployment.

3.4. Common method variance control

Because predictors and outcomes were obtained from the same respondents, we addressed common method variance (CMV) through a combined procedural and statistical strategy (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Procedurally, we protected respondent anonymity, separated the predictor and criterion blocks within the instrument to create psychological distance, and used clear, concrete item wording to reduce evaluation apprehension and consistency motifs. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of variance; we additionally applied a marker-variable technique, using a theoretically unrelated marker to estimate and partial out method-related covariance. Together with the discriminant-validity evidence reported below, these checks indicate that CMV is unlikely to threaten the substantive conclusions.

3.5. Analytical procedure

We followed the standard two-stage PLS-SEM evaluation (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022). We first assessed the reflective measurement model for indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity. We then evaluated the structural model for collinearity, the size and significance of path coefficients, in-sample explanatory power (R^2), effect sizes (f^2) and out-of-sample predictive relevance (Q^2) via blindfolding, with model fit summarized by the Standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). Indirect and total effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals from 5,000 resamples. Finally, we conducted multi-group analysis (MGA) to test the invariance of the structural paths across gender, visit status and sport-exposure segments, establishing measurement invariance via the MICOM procedure before comparing groups.

We adopted PLS-SEM in full awareness of the methodological debate surrounding it. Critics note that the method's apparent ability to estimate complex models with modest samples can encourage under-powered designs, and that the case-wise estimation produces biased loadings relative to covariance-based methods under certain conditions (Ringle et al., 2020; Henseler et al., 2016). We mitigated these concerns deliberately: the sample exceeds power requirements rather than relying on the method's tolerance for small n ; the CFA cross-validation in AMOS 27 provides a covariance-based check on the measurement structure; and we report predictive assessment through both blindfolding-based Q^2 and the holdout logic of PLSpredict, following current guidance that explanatory adequacy alone is insufficient for a model intended to inform practice (Shmueli et al., 2019). The combination of variance-based estimation for the structural test and covariance-based confirmation of the measurement model is intended to make the conclusions robust to the artefacts each method is individually prone to.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model

The reflective measurement model satisfied the recommended thresholds. All outer loadings exceeded 0.70, indicating adequate indicator reliability, and composite reliability (CR) exceeded 0.80 for every construct, confirming internal consistency without the redundancy that excessively high values would signal. Convergent validity, assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE), was supported for all constructs; SPME returned a borderline AVE of 0.502, and a bifactorial sensitivity test confirmed that its convergent validity was robust to alternative specifications. Table 1 reports the reliability and convergent-validity statistics.

Table 1. Construct reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Outer loadings	CR	AVE
SPME — Sport/mega-event lever	0.71–0.79	0.83	0.502
EXP — Lived experience	0.73–0.84	0.88	0.561
IMG — Perceived national image	0.74–0.86	0.89	0.598
CRED — Institutional credibility	0.72–0.83	0.86	0.557
INT — Behavioural intentions	0.78–0.87	0.90	0.642

Note: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. All loadings significant at $p < 0.001$. SPME AVE confirmed robust via bifactorial sensitivity test.

We checked discriminant validity two ways. Under the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with every other construct. HTMT gave the same verdict: all ratios stayed under the conservative 0.85 cutoff. The two tests agree that the five constructs measure genuinely different things. Table 2 reports the HTMT matrix.

Table 2. Discriminant validity (HTMT ratios).

	SPME	EXP	IMG	CRED
EXP	0.61			
IMG	0.49	0.72		
CRED	0.52	0.68	0.57	
INT	0.55	0.64	0.78	0.51

Note: All HTMT ratios below the 0.85 threshold. Fornell–Larcker criterion also satisfied for all construct pairs.

4.2. Structural model

There were no concerns regarding collinearity; each inner model's VIF value was less than 3.3 (the value at which a significant degree of lateral collinearity begins to distort path estimates). The fit of the model was also acceptable; the SRMR value was less than 0.08, and the predictive relevance of all four endogenous constructs was confirmed (i.e., Q^2 values were greater than 0.00 for each). Therefore, the model has both predictive (out of sample) and explanatory (in sample) abilities. The structural paths are provided in Table 3, and the decisions for all hypotheses are shown in Table 4. The experiential chain ran the way the theory predicts. SPME drove lived experience (H1), and lived experience was the engine of the whole model: its path to national image (H2) is the strongest one we estimated. Experience lifted institutional credibility too (H3), accounting for a fair slice of its variance. National image then predicted behavioural intentions strongly (H4). Credibility did not predict them at all, and H5 was rejected. One more path matters here. SPME kept a direct, significant effect on intentions even with the mediators in place (H6), so experience and image carry much of the story but not all of it: the mediation is partial.

Table 3. Structural model results (direct paths)

H	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	SPME $\rightarrow$ EXP	0.457	8.923	<0.001	Supported
H2	EXP $\rightarrow$ IMG	0.536	11.202	<0.001	Supported
H3	EXP $\rightarrow$ CRED	0.483	9.741	<0.001	Supported
H4	IMG $\rightarrow$ INT	0.421	7.815	<0.001	Supported
H5	CRED $\rightarrow$ INT	0.061	1.084	0.279	Rejected
H6	SPME $\rightarrow$ INT (direct)	0.198	3.642	<0.001	Supported

β = standardised path coefficient; bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. $R^2(\text{EXP}) = 0.209$; $R^2(\text{CRED}) = 0.233$; $R^2(\text{IMG}) = 0.287$; $R^2(\text{INT}) = 0.412$. CRED $\rightarrow$ INT coefficient reported illustratively at the non-significant level.

The modelling of the data yielded estimates that were compatible with both explanatory and predictive estimates. Large amounts of variance in behavioural intention can be explained by this model, with national image being responsible for most of that variance (as opposed to the additional but small popularity measure).

Table 4. Summary of hypothesis testing

H	Hypothesised relationship	Type	Decision
H1	SPME $\rightarrow$ EXP	Direct	Supported
H2	EXP $\rightarrow$ IMG (strongest path)	Direct	Supported
H3	EXP $\rightarrow$ CRED	Direct	Supported
H4	IMG $\rightarrow$ INT	Direct	Supported
H5	CRED $\rightarrow$ INT	Direct	Rejected
H6	SPME $\rightarrow$ INT (residual direct effect)	Direct	Supported
H7	SPME $\rightarrow$ EXP $\rightarrow$ IMG $\rightarrow$ INT	Indirect	Supported
H8	SPME $\rightarrow$ EXP $\rightarrow$ CRED $\rightarrow$ INT	Indirect	Rejected

Note: Indirect effects tested via bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 resamples). Partial mediation confirmed (H6 supported alongside H7).

In terms of the total variance explained by the lived experience, image and credibility were moderate; however, these similar relationships between image and intention, as well as experience and image, resulted in the largest f^2 values between these variables. In contrast the f^2 values for the relationship between experience and credibility were moderate and the f^2

value for the relationship between credibility and intention were effectively zero (consistent with H5). Since the Q^2 values for each endogenous construct showed positive values there was generalization of the model beyond this dataset thus fulfilling our need for a modelling framework to provide information to decision-makers as opposed to describing an individual dataset. The relationship between the two indirect pathways that were derived in this model pointed clearly that the pathways were not equivalent. The Directly Observed Effect model including the perceived image (SPME→EXP→IMG→INT) was statistically significant in that the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. This serves to support H7 as the primary indirect pathway through the framework. The reason is simple: the final CRED→INT link is null, so the chain breaks at its last step, and H8 was rejected. Table 4 summarizes the eight outcomes.

4.3. Multi-Group analysis

We checked measurement invariance first, using the procedure of MICOM. It held: configural and compositional invariance were both met, and the composite means and variances were equal across the segments we compared. The PLS-MGA then turned up no significant path differences anywhere. Men and women gave the same pattern, first-time and repeat visitors gave the same pattern, and high- and low-exposure visitors did too. The gender result is the one worth dwelling on. The experiential activation mechanism, and the way image outweighs credibility, look the same across demographic groups, so what we are seeing is a stable process rather than something peculiar to one segment. In short, the model holds up against the main ways this sample varies.

5. Discussion

The results point to one Organising claim: sport mega-events build nation brand capital through experiential activation, not through exposure on its own. The strongest path in the model runs from lived experience to national image, and lived experience is itself the immediate product of the perceived event lever. That makes experience the pivot of the whole system, the thing that turns a mega-event from a broadcast spectacle into perception that can be encoded and passed on. The finding gives event leveraging theory (Chalip, 2006; Chalip, 2004) direct structural support: the celebratory, atmospheric side of an event is not a sideshow to brand formation but the channel through which branding actually happens. It also backs Gibson, Kaplanidou and Kang's view of visitor experience as a mediator rather than an endpoint (Gibson et al., 2012), and it spells out the cognitive structure, image and credibility, that experience feeds into.

5.1. The Dual Pathway and the Rejection of H5

The most theoretically consequential result is the asymmetry between the two cognitive pathways. National image is a strong predictor of behavioural intentions, whereas institutional credibility exerts no direct effect H5 is rejected. We treat this as a substantive finding rather than a measurement anomaly, because the measurement model establishes credibility as a reliable, valid and distinct construct that is itself well explained by experience (H3 supported). The implication is that functional credibility does not directly generate behavioural intentions; it operates upstream, as a builder of image, not as a direct driver of intention. Visitors do not decide to return or recommend because a country is competently organized; they decide on the basis of the affective-evaluative image they hold, an image to which demonstrated competence contributes but which it does not bypass. Credibility is necessary scaffolding for image, but image is the operative antecedent of intention.

This explains why the credibility-mediated sequential chain (H8) is rejected while the image-

mediated chain (H7) is confirmed. The two indirect routes are not symmetric alternatives; one is load-bearing and the other is broken at its final link. For nation branding theory, this refines the dual-pathway view by establishing a hierarchy between cognitive routes: competence signals are reputational inputs, but affective-evaluative image is the conversion point. The result cautions against the common managerial assumption that flawless operational delivery is sufficient to secure brand returns. Operational excellence is consequential precisely and only to the extent that it is metabolized into a more favorable national image.

5.2. Partial Mediation and Affective Sport Attachment

Confirming H6, a residual direct effect of the sport lever on intentions, tells us the mediation is partial, not full. Some of sport's influence on intentions skips the cognitive chain altogether. We read that residual as affective sport attachment: the emotional bond that the spectacle, the contest and the shared excitement of the event create on their own, without any reasoned appraisal of image or competence. It fits the emotional capital that place-branding-through-sport work attributes to fans and to the pull of teams and athletes (Richelieu, 2018). In practical terms, sport feeds brand intentions through two channels at once: a cognitive one, running through experience and image, and an affective one that works directly. A strategy that tends only to the cognitive channel leaves the affective one fallow, and the reverse holds too.

5.3. The Post-Event Leveraging Gap

The Post Event Leverage Gap (PELG) is the primary focus of this article. The PELG exists as the time-based/duration-based distance between the peak in visibility created by a mega-event and the capacity-building (institutional) to convert that visibility into brand capital over the long term. The PELG exists due to the fact that while visibility and conversion exist on different timelines. During a mega-event, visibility is at its peak. However, conversion is an ongoing process that takes place through the lens of experience, image, and intent, and it relies heavily on long-term follow-up after the event has ended. It is possible for an event host to be number one in terms of visibility and yet receive little to no tangible benefit from the mega-event because the benefit comes from the experience- and cognition-based systems we have highlighted above and is not a function of exposure to the event.

The situation in Morocco (the puzzle from which this study originated) serves as an explicit illustration of the PELG concept. At the World Cup in 2022, the Atlas Lions reached the semi-finals and received global attention; however, the visibility produced by the team did not create quantitatively measurable brand gains; as of 2024, Morocco remains 62nd on the Brand Finance ranking scale (Brand Finance, 2024). Morocco did receive the visibility; however, it has not closed the conversion gap, as it continues to lack the systems necessary to convert exposure into long-term, image-based brand capital, which were left behind by the spectacle created by the team's performance.

5.4. Sustainability Implications

Put sustainability at the center and a mega-event's legacy looks different. The asset that actually lasts is not a stadium or a road. It is the visitor experience, once it has been encoded and carried home as a favorable impression and a reason to return. Unlike a stadium, that impression does not wear out on a set timetable. A later event can switch it back on, and it spreads by word of mouth rather than through new spending. In that sense visitor experience is the more sustainable legacy, renewable where stadiums are wasting assets, and portable across event cycles where infrastructure is fixed and often underused once the event is over

(Thomson et al., 2019; Smith, 2012). Putting experiential quality at the center of leveraging therefore aligns mega-event policy with sustainable development, moving the emphasis off one-off spending and onto a reputational asset that keeps paying out. There is a distributive angle that strengthens the sustainability case. Physical mega-event legacy is famously prone to the white-elephant problem, where costly venues carry maintenance bills and opportunity costs long after anyone stops using them, and that risk lands on public budgets (Müller, 2015).

An experiential legacy has no such recurring bill: once encoded, a favorable impression lives with the visitors themselves and spreads at no cost to the host, which makes it both more durable and a more efficient use of what a mega-event consumes. Pointing evaluation at this intangible asset would also change how we judge event success, putting indicators of experiential quality and image conversion ahead of headline visibility and attendance, which say more about whether the event produced anything that lasts. The same idea works as a diagnostic. Once the conversion gap is named, a host has something concrete to aim at, because a brand legacy only lasts if the host closes that gap before the attention fades. For an emerging economy that is worth a lot: brand capital built through sport accumulates over the years and is hard for rivals to copy. The catch is that it depends entirely on treating conversion, not visibility, as the goal. This is exactly the choice in front of Morocco as it prepares for 2030, and the conclusion picks it up again.

5.5. Comparison with the Literature

The findings both confirm and qualify prior work. They confirm the leveraging tradition's insistence that benefits are realized through strategy rather than conferred by the event (Chalip, 2006; Chalip, 2004), and the destination-image literature's identification of image as a proximal antecedent of intention (Zhang et al., 2014). They qualify the implicit assumption, common in policy discourse, that organisational credibility and operational excellence are themselves sufficient to secure brand returns: the rejection of H5 shows that competence signals require translation into image to affect behaviour. And they extend the nation-branding-through-sport literature (Knott et al., 2015; Richelieu, 2018) by supplying a structurally estimated mechanism experiential activation with a hierarchical dual pathway and a diagnostic construct, the PELG, that names the conversion problem the literature has long gestured toward without formalizing.

6. Conclusion

This study asked how sport mega-events convert visibility into lasting nation brand capital, and tested an answer on a multinational sample of 314 international visitors during AFCON 2025. The answer is fairly clear: conversion runs through experiential activation. Lived experience is the central mechanism. It feeds a dual cognitive pathway in which national image, not institutional credibility, drives behavioural intentions, and sport keeps a residual affective effect that leaves the mediation partial rather than complete. Six of the eight hypotheses held. The two that did not, the null direct effect of credibility (H5) and the broken credibility chain that follows from it (H8), are findings in their own right that sharpen the theory rather than weaken it. The article makes three theoretical contributions. It gives structural evidence that experiential activation, not exposure, is what links sport to brand intentions. It establishes a hierarchy inside the dual perceptual pathway, with image outweighing credibility and credibility working upstream to build image. And it introduces the Post-Event Leveraging Gap, at once a construct that explains why visibility peaks fail to convert and a diagnostic for sustainable post-event strategy.

Practically, the results point to where the effort should go. For AFCON 2025 the first job is

the visitor experience itself: protect it, raise its quality, and treat it as the seed capital behind every brand effect that follows. The second is less obvious but just as important, the institutional machinery that converts post-event visibility into image before the visibility fades. The 2030 World Cup is the larger test. Morocco gains little by treating it as a visibility event to maximize; the work is to engineer conversion, which means designing the experience deliberately, communicating in a way that turns competent delivery into a reputation people actually feel, and running a post-event program built specifically to close the PELG. A sustainable brand legacy is made after the cameras leave, and it goes to the host that plans for conversion rather than the one that settles for celebrating exposure.

For Morocco the agenda is concrete. AFCON 2025 is best read as a rehearsal, a chance to build and test the conversion machinery rather than a tournament to chalk up as a success. In practice that means measuring the visitor experience, watching how the country's image shifts more or less in real time, and putting in place the institutional routines that carry a good impression into the years between events. Then 2030 is where the same machinery runs at full scale. The danger PELG flags is a familiar one: each tournament gets celebrated for its visibility and then allowed to fade before the next, so the country keeps banking attention without ever compounding it into brand capital. Closing that gap is unglamorous. It is steady conversion work, resourced and owned between events, and that is where a lasting advantage is actually built.

The study has limits worth stating plainly. It is cross-sectional, so the causal ordering rests on theory rather than on timing; a study that followed the same visitors after the event would test the conversion dynamic directly and let us watch the PELG play out over time. The sample is non-probability, drawn by convenience and purposive selection, which limits statistical generalization even with the demographic spread and the invariance checks. And it covers one country and one event, so whether the mechanism holds across other hosts and event types is still open. Future work should pursue longitudinal and multi-country replications, bring in the qualitative phase of the wider mixed-methods design to show how visitors actually narrate the move from experience to image, measure the affective residual directly through sport-attachment scales, and give PELG institutional and time-based indicators so the conversion gap can be measured rather than only argued. Together these would move the field from showing that mega-events can build brands toward pinning down when, for whom, and through what institutional work they really do.

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