

Christof Seeger  
Jörg-Uwe Nieland  
Jürgen Mittag *Editors*

# The FIFA World Cup in Qatar

Reflections from the Perspective  
of Sports Communication and Sports  
Policy



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## **Part I**

# **Introduction and Background: Relevance, Interpretations and Conceptual Perspectives**



# Media, Politics, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar: A Mega-Event at the Crossroads—Introductory Considerations

1

Jürgen Mittag, Jörg-Uwe Nieland, and Christof Seeger

## 1 Foundational Observations

Mega sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup are both media spectacles and major sport-political occurrences. They shape public discourse, set agendas, and influence the long-term image of the host nation. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar was particularly charged in this regard, as it was accompanied well in advance by extensive controversies: human rights violations, allegations of corruption, and cultural fault lines were at the centre of international debates, conducted across countless channels and by a multitude of actors.

The 2022 World Cup in Qatar also marked a rupture with previous tournaments in another respect. For the first time, a World Cup was held in an Arab country and

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during the Northern Hemisphere's winter season—a shift that entailed profound sporting, political, and media consequences. As a global mega-event, it was embedded within a wide range of discourses that extended far beyond sport itself: questions of human rights, international energy policy, regional power projection, and the role of media in global opinion-shaping were intimately interwoven with this tournament.

Research on mega-events regularly emphasizes that such spectacles function as complex intersections of sport, politics, economics, and media (cf. Gruneau & Horne, 2017). The 2022 World Cup in Qatar not only confirms this thesis, but accentuates it to an extent that the event can be characterized as a landmark in political and media terms (cf. Nieland, 2023). Politically, the tournament represented an unprecedented convergence of soft power strategies and globalized critiques of sportswashing (cf. Delaney, 2024; Dubinsky, 2024). Its budget exceeded all previous dimensions: estimates suggest that Qatar's expenditures for hosting the tournament reached approximately USD 220 billion—several times the costs of prior World Cups, which amounted to around USD 11.6 billion for Russia 2018 and USD 15 billion for Brazil 2014 (Barrios et al., 2016).

From a media perspective, the tournament was shaped by an unparalleled density and duration of critical reporting, coupled with the event logic of live spectacle and the new dynamics of digital counter-publics (cf. Meier et al., 2019). In the historical and memory-political context of mega sporting events, the 2022 World Cup represents yet another milestone or turning point. Previous events have not remained in collective memory solely as sporting occasions (cf. Rinke & Schiller, 2014). In the case of Qatar, however, it can be expected that, far more than in Argentina 1978 or Russia 2018, remembrance will be dominated not primarily by sporting achievements but by a complex, politically charged, multi-perspectival perception that has redefined the relationship between sport, media, and international politics (cf. Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

The still unresolved Qatargate scandal in the European Parliament, which came to light at the end of 2022, underscores this assessment. In the course of investigations by Belgian prosecutors, several Members of the European Parliament and parliamentary staff were suspected of having accepted substantial bribes, particularly from Qatari actors. The alleged aim of these payments was to promote Qatar's foreign policy interests within the Parliament, especially by fostering a more favourable stance towards the Emirate in relation to its human rights record, visa liberalization, and economic cooperation. The scandal gained particular urgency not only because it tarnished Qatar's image as host of the 2022 World Cup but also because it undermined trust in the integrity of the European Parliament itself. While many media outlets interpreted the scandal as evidence supporting the thesis

of sportswashing, other commentators emphasized that the revelations highlighted less the sport itself than the structural weaknesses of the EU Parliament and its oversight mechanisms. Fundamentally, however, the affair demonstrates how closely mega sporting events, political networks, and economic interests are intertwined (Beichelt, 2018).

This volume thus presents a range of arguments and evidence supporting the view that the 2022 World Cup in Qatar represents a distinct turning point in the interplay of sport, politics, and media—primarily from a media and communication studies perspective, but also from a political science perspective. Rather than presenting a single, overarching interpretation of the 2022 tournament, the contributions instead outline multiple readings, which are intended as invitations to further scholarly engagement with the media and political dimensions of mega sporting events.

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## 2 The 2022 World Cup as an Intensification of Medialization?

Global sports mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games attract worldwide media attention, mobilize national cohesion, and offer host states a unique platform to influence international perceptions (cf. Dayan & Katz, 1992; Wenner & Billings, 2017). Research in sports communication has captured the growing influence of media on sports through the concept of medialization (cf. Dohle & Vowe, 2006; Frandsen, 2020). The term “medialization” refers to the fundamental increase in the importance of media, their routines, and their logics. Three central aspects are typically highlighted: first, the regularities of selection, i.e., the deliberate choice of events, facts, and conditions for public communication; second, the regularities of narration, referring to typical patterns in the storytelling, structure, and sequencing of media texts; and third, the regularities of interpretation, i.e., recurring patterns of meaning-making and framing, independent of the topic (Marcinkowski, 2015).

Both individual and collective actors respond to the increasing orientation toward resonance in modern (media) societies. In particular, they adopt the rules of the media for generating public attention into their own range of actions. It is emphasized that actors are aware of the media’s effects and therefore adapt more closely to media logics (cf. Meyen, 2014).

Sport has become a paradigmatic example of medialization. This is evident, on the one hand, in measures to increase the visibility of sports in the media (e.g., adjustments to equipment and venues), in the scheduling of competitions (e.g.,

extending match days to three or four weekend days or holding events in the evening, as in Formula 1 or alpine skiing), and in the introduction of new rules and competitions—e.g., pursuit races in biathlon (cf. Dohle & Vowe, 2006). On the other hand, it manifests in the emergence of new providers and marketing strategies, including the growing influence of non-media actors. New distribution channels and providers enable reporting and marketing beyond traditional journalism or (sports) sponsorship. Significant new actors include streaming platforms and companies such as Red Bull (Nieland, 2023).

With regard to the media marketing of FIFA World Cups, effects of medialization are unmistakable, for example in the structuring of coverage—especially in football’s core market in Europe—toward attractive broadcasting times and expanded reporting. Recently, attention has also been drawn to the growing interest of (media) audiences in commenting on and critiquing major sports events via social media. The reception of FIFA World Cups and their impact on viewers has been studied from various perspectives (cf. Mittag & Nieland, 2007). Research shows that successful World Cup matches improve spectators’ mood and have positive effects on self-confidence and assessments of the country’s economic situation. Moreover, major football events can influence the “public mood” in the political climate, as national team results not only uplift the mood of football-interested audiences but also affect their voting intentions and evaluation of candidates (cf. Meier et al., 2019).

A largely neglected field has been the relationship between sports organizations and media (cf. Nieland & Mittag, 2011; Chappelet, Clausen & Bayle, 2019). In the context of the World Cup in Qatar, numerous documentaries and reports emerged that not only criticized individual officials or aspects of the bidding process but also engaged in broader critical discourses (cf. Beyer & Schulze-Marmeling, 2021).

The transformation of the media landscape has led both to the expansion and diversification of sports coverage (with new providers and offerings, many available online at any time) and to changes in media usage habits. It has been observed that many debates initiated by traditional media have shifted to social media, where they develop considerable momentum (Nieland, 2023). These platforms enable communicative exchange among potentially large numbers of users, who can discuss topics equally and spontaneously. At the same time, echo chambers may arise, in which users reinforce each other’s perspectives rather than engaging in deliberative exchange. This fosters processes of self-empowerment, as any user can become an author.

The conditions for a large sports audience were particularly favourable for the World Cup in Qatar. Live media events that captivate an entire nation have become

rare. Nevertheless, major sports events continue to gather large numbers of viewers—sometimes collectively and publicly (e.g., public viewings in pubs). These events are subsequently discussed intensively, often emotionally, both face-to-face and on online platforms. Moreover, extremely comprehensive and detailed statistics on athletes, teams, and competitions are available, allowing fans a panoptic overview to observe, classify, and evaluate players. This form of “power from below” is a key incentive of sports events.

From the outset, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar faced strong criticism, not only due to human rights violations (Rook & Heerdt, 2023). The tournament’s relocation to winter, which limited opportunities for public viewing events that foster ritualized communities, and the interruption of popular national and international leagues are central factors for fan reluctance. The low presence of foreign fans on-site is partly due to the enormous costs of flights, accommodation, and tickets, and partly due to the underdeveloped football culture in Arab countries (Grix et al., 2019; Dubinsky, 2024). At first glance, declining spectator interest might appear to limit the medialization of football. However, much suggests that football fans’ interest—particularly in Europe—was merely shifted from national teams to club teams, partly because clubs with international stars offer more attractive football. Attendance at matches has become considerably more expensive due to increased commercialization, and media consumers must also pay more for access to live coverage.

The involvement of Arab sheikhs or sovereign wealth funds (as with Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, or Newcastle United) marks another peak of commercialization (cf. Grix & Brannagan, 2024). At the same time, there is also resistance to the commercialization of football—with some success (Delaney, 2024). For example, protests by football fans (especially in England) led to the (temporary) suspension of plans for a European Super League. This is a clear indication of the continued medialization of football, as fan protests received significant media attention precisely because fans understood and leveraged media logic for their purposes.

---

### **3 The Media as Key Actors of the 2022 World Cup?**

The role of the media can also be examined along the three phases of the tournament—before, during, and after—focusing particularly on the actor role that media assume. Conceptual approaches such as agenda-setting, framing, and the concept of media events provide analytical tools for this purpose. In the pre-tournament coverage of the World Cup, a critical tone dominated many media outlets. Western

mainstream media set clear agendas: in line with agenda-setting theory, attention was consistently directed toward topics such as labour rights, deaths among migrant workers, and the lack of press and freedom of expression. Through framing, these issues were embedded in a normative context, for example via moral comparisons with democratic standards or by juxtaposing sporting values with authoritarian structures (Nieland, 2023). However, media criticism was not homogeneous: while Western European and North American media emphasized a problem-focused and sometimes morally charged discourse, Qatari and other Gulf media attempted to steer narratives toward economic modernization, cultural hospitality, and sporting infrastructure projects. This contrast highlights the transcultural dimension of media frames. The pre-tournament phase thus serves as a paradigmatic example of the media's function as gatekeepers and norm-setters: they not only filter topics but also embed them in specific interpretive frames that significantly shape expectations for the event.

With the kick-off, the focus of reporting shifted markedly. The theory of media events describes major sporting occasions as “ritualized interruptions of everyday life,” (Dayan & Katz, 1992) during which media attention is strongly concentrated on emotional, national, and symbolic elements (Gruneau & Horne, 2017). This was also evident at the World Cup in Qatar: match reports, player biographies, and emotional imagery dominated headlines, while critical issues appeared less frequently and were often treated in separate formats. At the same time, critical discourse remained present in the background. Documentaries, feature articles, and investigative reports continued to address topics such as labour migration and restrictions on press freedom, albeit with lower reach than live coverage (Nieland, 2023). This illustrates a tension between journalistic mission and market logic: during the tournament, mass media attention follows the event logic, pushing critical perspectives to the periphery (cf. McEnnis, 2021).

Social media played a particularly important role: platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok provided space for counter-narratives, where activists and fans voiced criticism, circulated hashtags, and presented alternative images of the tournament. This created a parallel discursive space that partly undermined official media staging.

After the final whistle, the phase of re-evaluation began. Media attention shifted again, now toward the “legacy discourse”: what remains of the tournament—sportingly, politically, socially? In Western media, an ambivalent evaluation emerged: on one hand, the sporting spectacle, particularly Argentina's victory and Lionel Messi's triumph, was celebrated as a highlight. On the other hand, critical reflection persisted regarding whether Qatar's World Cup genuinely improved human rights conditions or merely temporarily overshadowed them. The theory of

“narrative closure” illustrates that media eventually consolidate an interpretive frame—either through positive assessment (“a successful tournament”) or critical admonition (“a sporting festival with shadows”). Which version dominates depends on the editorial orientation and cultural perspective. In Qatari and regional media, positive, image-enhancing narratives prevailed, portraying the tournament as evidence of organizational excellence and national strength.

In the long term, the question of media sustainability is crucial: do grievances remain in public awareness, or do sporting memories overshadow critical voices (cf. Jennings, 2015)? This question is not only empirically relevant but also normatively significant, as it highlights the media’s responsibility to demand accountability not only in the short term but also over time. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar exemplifies how major sporting events generate multi-layered media discourses that vary considerably depending on phase, platform, and cultural context. Before the tournament, investigative criticism and normative debates dominated; during the World Cup, event logic prevailed; and after the tournament, a contest over the enduring narrative emerged. From an academic perspective, it becomes clear that the media do not act merely as neutral transmitters but are actively involved in negotiating social meanings (cf. Nieland, 2023). The World Cup in Qatar thus serves as a case study for understanding how media attention mediates between critical journalism, entertainment logic, and political interests—and what long-term traces it leaves in the collective memory.

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#### **4 The 2022 World Cup in Qatar as a Strategic Instrument for Soft Power and Structural Transformation?**

Qatar’s bid for the 2022 World Cup can be understood in terms of Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power”—as a strategic effort to gain international recognition through attractiveness, image, and cultural influence (cf. Boykoff, 2022). Qatar, a resource-rich but geographically small Gulf state, leveraged the World Cup to position itself as a globally relevant actor and to draw attention to its role as an energy power (particularly in liquefied natural gas, LNG).

At times, Qatar faced a difficult situation. The political and economic blockade (2017–2021) imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt created significant foreign policy challenges: trade routes were closed, diplomatic relations were severed, and the country was politically isolated. This crisis forced Qatar to diversify its foreign policy and strengthen relationships with other states, such as Turkey, Iran, and Western powers. The upcoming 2022 World Cup

proved advantageous in this context, signaling to neighboring countries and the international community that Qatar could act sovereignly, resiliently, and effectively even under pressure. The World Cup itself also served as a platform for normalizing regional relations. Following the Al-Ula Agreement in January 2021, which officially ended the blockade, Qatar was able to visibly demonstrate its renewed relationships with neighbors during the preparation and execution of the tournament, showcasing its economic and political capability. In this way, the tournament acted as a symbol of stability and reintegration into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context.

This strategy follows a pattern already observable in other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes: China (2008 Olympics), Russia (2018 World Cup, 2014 Olympics), or Azerbaijan (Baku 2015, Formula 1). In all cases, major sporting events served not only as entertainment but also to strengthen national legitimacy and international visibility (cf. Grix & Brannagan, 2024).

In Qatar's case, the World Cup also aligns with the country's broader economic transformation. The 2022 FIFA World Cup is embedded in the long-term development strategy "Qatar National Vision 2030," which encompasses four central pillars—economic development, social development, environmental protection, and the promotion of human capital—and identifies the World Cup as a key vehicle for accelerating transformational processes. The tournament was deliberately conceived not only as a sporting event but as a comprehensive development program designed to justify extensive investments and structural changes (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

A major focus was on diversifying the economy, which heavily depends on fossil fuels. Qatar, whose national budget relies substantially on LNG exports, used the World Cup to attract international investors and establish new growth sectors. Tourism played a central role: the expansion of luxury accommodations, conference centers, and recreational infrastructure aimed to position the country as an event and luxury destination, comparable to the United Arab Emirates, especially Dubai. Concurrently, the services sector—particularly hospitality, gastronomy, transport, and security services—was significantly expanded. Many projects were financed through public-private partnerships to integrate foreign capital and expertise.

At the same time, the World Cup accelerated an unprecedented phase of urbanization and infrastructure development. Major projects included the completion of the fully automated Doha Metro with a 77-km network, the expansion of Hamad International Airport, and extensive modernization of the road network. In sports infrastructure, eight stadiums were newly built or comprehensively renovated, some with modular designs for later dismantling and reuse. Large-scale urban de-

velopment projects, such as Lusail City—a fully planned metropolis for around 200,000 people north of Doha, designed as a symbol of a futuristic Gulf city—were also implemented. Parallel investments were made in digital infrastructure, including comprehensive 5G networks and smart-city technologies, intended to serve as long-term locational advantages.

Sport played a strategic key role in Qatar's economic transformation, far beyond the mere hosting of competitions. Sport functioned as a multiplier for infrastructure projects, a marketing instrument for global positioning, and a bridge for developing new economic sectors. In the Qatar National Vision 2030, sport is explicitly identified as a lever for economic diversification and modernization. Hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup was the most visible element of a broader sports strategy that Qatar has systematically pursued since the 2000s. Previously, the country hosted international sporting events such as the 2006 Asian Games, the 2015 Handball World Championship, the 2016 Road Cycling World Championship, and regular ATP and WTA tennis tournaments. Including youth world championships, there are very few international sporting events that have not been held in Qatar. These events were part of a master plan, particularly aimed at establishing Doha as a global sports hub and event destination.

Sport also provided a legitimization framework for massive infrastructure investments usable beyond sports, including metro lines, airport expansions, hotels, conference centres, and digital networks. This approach aligns with the event-research concept of event legacy, which distinguishes between material legacies (buildings and transport systems), immaterial legacies (image and expertise), and institutional legacies (new organizations and laws). Qatar leveraged all three dimensions simultaneously. Sporting events were deliberately used to attract tourism, reduce dependence on the LNG sector, strengthen the services sector—particularly hospitality, event logistics, and security—access media and sports rights markets (e.g., through the expansion of beIN Sports), and develop exportable event-management know-how. From a resource-based view, Qatar utilized its financial resources from the energy sector to build competitive advantages in these sectors.

Internationally, Qatar follows a pattern observed in other countries. South Korea used the 1988 Olympics for political opening and economic modernization, particularly through tourism promotion and infrastructure development. China's 2008 Olympics strategy involved massive infrastructure projects, elevating Beijing as a global capital and expanding soft power. Russia's 2018 World Cup and 2014 Winter Olympics combined diversification rhetoric with image-oriented projects, sometimes with limited economic sustainability. Brazil's 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics aimed at urban renewal and tourism effects but struggled with low long-term utiliza-

tion of sports venues. The key difference for Qatar lies in its extreme financial capacity and small size, allowing concentrated investments and infrastructure that reached international top standards within a few years (cf. Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

Sport also functioned as a branding and networking platform. Ownership of the French top club Paris Saint-Germain, sponsorship of major European clubs such as FC Bayern Munich and AS Roma, the media reach of beIN Sports, and the organization of international sports conferences are elements of a soft-power strategy intended to embed the “Qatar” brand in positive associations. This brand cultivation through sport aligns with the concept of nation branding, where sport is considered a particularly effective image carrier (Dubinsky, 2024).

Despite the high level of investment, comparative studies of major sporting events show that economic sustainability is often limited if post-use is not carefully planned. Qatar also faces risks: stadium and hotel overcapacity, strong competition in luxury and event tourism from regional rivals, and continued reliance on the energy sector. The critical question remains whether sports-supported diversification is more than a temporary image project or if sport primarily served as a short-term catalyst for state-directed infrastructure programs (cf. Grix et al., 2019; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

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## 5 The World Cup in Qatar as a Prime Example of Sportswashing?

The accusations of sportswashing against Qatar in the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup require a nuanced consideration that considers the complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics of this phenomenon (cf. Delaney, 2024). At first glance, Qatar indeed used the World Cup as a strategic instrument to polish its international image. The emirate invested billions in prestigious infrastructure projects and staged itself during the tournament as an open, modern nation—a calculated contrast to well-known human rights issues such as the precarious working conditions of migrant laborers or the discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ individuals. FIFA supported these narratives through a depoliticized event logic that marginalized critical voices, for instance by banning the “OneLove” captain’s armband.

However, the attempt at pure image enhancement only partially succeeded. Instead of unbroken legitimacy gains, the World Cup developed into a paradoxical arena where reputational gains and scandalization balanced each other. Global media attention amplified Qatar’s self-presentation but simultaneously created unprecedented visibility for the structural issues in the country. Unlike many previous

World Cups, criticism of Qatar was particularly intense and prolonged. NGOs such as Amnesty International (cf. Amnesty International, 2021) and Human Rights Watch, as well as major media outlets, regularly highlighted violations of labor rights, deaths among migrant workers, and restrictions on freedom of expression and the press (Beyer & Schulze-Marmeling, 2021; Rook & Heerd, 2023). These debates were further fuelled by the 2015 FIFA corruption scandal, which cast Qatar's hosting decision in an even more critical light retrospectively. From a governance perspective, this demonstrates that the World Cup can be analysed not only from a sports-political standpoint but also as an example of problematic decision-making processes in international sports management (Chappelet et al., 2019). The World Cup thus became a catalyst for a transnational debate on the political instrumentalization of sports that extended far beyond Qatar (cf. Chadwick et al., 2024).

Interestingly, this pressure led to limited but significant reforms in Qatar, such as the abolition of the kafala system and the introduction of a minimum wage for workers. While these changes remained incomplete and were often implemented half-heartedly, they show that the sportswashing accusation is not only a critical diagnosis but also a potential corrective. The 2022 World Cup thus illustrated the dialectical nature of modern mega-sporting events: they provide authoritarian regimes with a stage for soft power but simultaneously expose them to an international system of scrutiny that no longer unquestioningly accepts symbolic politics (cf. Gerschewski et al., 2024).

In retrospect, it can be noted that the basic thesis of the sportswashing accusations is indeed relevant, but the phenomenon itself proved to be far more ambivalent than intended. Qatar reaped short-term prestige gains but faced a sustained problematization of its policies. The World Cup left a double lesson: on the one hand, sport remains a risky PR tool for authoritarian states, as it generates unwanted transparency. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the increasing mediatization and politicization of mega-events enables new forms of activism that transform sporting spectacles into arenas of societal negotiation. For the future, this means that the accusation of sportswashing has itself become a powerful counter-instrument—a irony that aptly highlights the contradictions of global sports politics in the twenty-first century.

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## 6 Examining Key Issues: Insights from This Volume

Global sport has become far more than just competition and entertainment—it is now a battleground for values, ideologies, and global narratives. Events such as the FIFA World Cup have transformed into stages where diplomacy, activism,

commercialism, and political symbolism intersect. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar offered a vivid case study of these dynamics, sparking widespread global discourse around human rights, governance, and media accountability. This book examines the complex interplay of sport, politics, and society through the lens of Qatar 2022. By analyzing multiple dimensions—ranging from civil protest to institutional reform, media coverage to audience behavior—the volume unpacks how mega-events serve both as instruments of soft power and as spaces of democratic expression and resistance.

In his Chap. 16, *Jürgen Mittag* explores how the tournament became a lightning rod for civil society activism, particularly in Germany. His focus on migrant labour exploitation and the “One Love” armband controversy reveals how symbolic gestures and political narratives clashed on the global football stage. In a second contribution, Chap. 2, Mittag critically reflects on FIFA’s organizational evolution. Tracing events from the dual awarding of Russia and Qatar to the post-2015 reform agenda, he argues that deep-rooted power structures persist despite cosmetic changes—calling for a move toward more inclusive, multi-actor governance.

Taking a different angle, the Chap. 3 by *Thomas Birkner*, *Miriam Anna Moderegger*, and *Pauline Reichenberger* examines how FIFA and Austrian media outlets framed the tournament differently. Their comparative analysis illustrates the crucial role of journalism in resisting mediatized sports propaganda and safeguarding democratic discourse.

Delving into audience perspectives, *Romy Schwaiger* presents Chap. 4. Based on a large-scale survey of German football fans, her findings reveal a gap between ethical convictions and actual behaviour: although most respondents viewed Qatar critically, relatively few followed through with a boycott. Her study raises important questions about the limits of ethical consumerism in sport.

Similarly, *Juliette Passamani* and *Daniel Beck* address this ethical tension in Chap. 5. Focusing on Swiss fans, they reveal how social pressure and communal viewing habits often override political convictions, showing how complex motivations shape fan behavior during controversial events.

In her contribution, Chap. 6, Romy Schwaiger analyses a study on the first female TV football commentators in German television at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, which is based on a survey of 1,386 individuals interested in football. The findings indicate that professional competencies such as understanding of the game and eloquence are considered central qualities, while appearance is deemed secondary, and that male respondents consistently rate the commentators’ performance worse than female respondents do. Furthermore, the study reveals a low level of public recognition for the commentators, with only one commentator being spontaneously known to a broader audience.

Shifting attention to gender representation, Chap. 7 by *Michael Schaffrath* and *Bastian Daneyko* provides a content analysis of female commentators during the World Cup. While noting expressive delivery and enthusiasm, the authors also point to rhetorical shortcomings, advocating for improved training to elevate women's presence in a male-dominated space.

Exploring the evolution of digital journalism, *Robert Bauguitte*, *Daniel Nölleke*, and *Inga Oelrichs* offer Chap. 8. Their chapter shows how German live ticker apps—traditionally focused on match facts—have begun incorporating socio-political commentary, suggesting a promising expansion of the journalistic role even in real-time formats.

Turning to British media, *Simon McEnnis* investigates the ethical dilemmas of sports broadcasters in Chap. 9. Using the concept of metajournalistic discourse, he illustrates how UK journalists struggled to reconcile critical coverage with entertaining storytelling, underlining the shifting identity of sports journalism in an increasingly politicized landscape.

In Chap. 10, *Xavier Ramon*, *José Luis Rojas-Torrijos*, and *Emilio Fernández-Peña* focus on public service media across Europe. Analyzing Twitter activity during the tournament, they uncover tensions between the appeal of popular sports content and the responsibility to reflect diverse public interests.

Meanwhile, Chap. 11 by *Lena Zils* and *Thomas Birkner* investigates the symbolic protest behind the “One Love” campaign. They analyse how the banned armband gesture became a rallying point for affective publics championing LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion, spotlighting the emotional power of symbols in global sport.

In Chap. 12, *Christof Seeger*, *Jörg-Uwe Nieland*, and *Sina Muschelknautz* present a comparative media study of German and Qatari newspapers. Their analysis shows how competing narratives shaped perceptions of the event—ranging from celebrations of progress to condemnation of human rights violations—revealing the dual role of mega-events in nation branding and ideological projection.

Responding to Western media criticism, *Carola Richter* and *Abdulrahman Al-Shami* provide a postcolonial perspective in Chap. 13. They examine how Qatari media sought to assert cultural pride and resist narratives of othering, using media strategies to redefine national identity on the world stage.

Looking at digital fan behaviour, *Felix Krell*, *Jörg-Uwe Nieland*, *Udo Göttlich*, and *Johannes Czech* investigate Twitter debates in Chap. 14. Applying the concept of co-orientation, they show how moral fragmentation, rather than consensus, dominated Second Screen discourse during the World Cup.

Concluding the volume, *Mohammed Alghamdi* and *Franziska Weder* analyse Saudi Arabia's use of international sporting events in Chap. 15. Framed within Vision 2030, their chapter shows how sport becomes a strategic tool for nation branding—used to position the Kingdom as progressive and globally relevant despite underlying political tensions.

Together, these diverse contributions reveal how sport mega-events are far more than games. They are contested arenas where power is performed, challenged, and negotiated across borders, audiences, and institutions. This book offers an essential guide to understanding the shifting terrain of global sport in an era defined by protest, polarization, and political awakening.

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## **7 As to the Future: Looking Ahead—FIFA World Cups After Qatar**

Mega-sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games have captivated billions of viewers for decades. Yet their future faces enormous challenges: rising costs, ecological concerns, social inequality, and increasing public awareness of sustainability all call the traditional model into question. While proponents argue that these events are irreplaceable, growing voices demand radical reform—or even an end to these massive spectacles—appealing to several substantive dimensions:

Hosting mega-events has long become a financial black hole. Costs for infrastructure, security, and organisation regularly skyrocket—often at taxpayers' expense. Examples such as the Olympics in Athens (2004) or Rio (2016) show that many cities are left with empty coffers and unused stadiums after the event. Organizers promise economic boosts, yet studies show these are frequently overestimated. The future may either see greater privatization (e.g., through Saudi investments in sport) or boycotts by cities unable to shoulder the costs.

The ecological footprint of large-scale events is immense: flights for teams and fans, energy consumption in stadiums, and construction on greenfields. Despite efforts to create “climate-neutral” events (such as the announced green World Cup 2026), the gap between sustainability rhetoric and reality remains large. In the future, environmental groups and regulators are likely to impose stricter requirements—or events will have to rely on existing infrastructure instead of building new arenas each time. Protests against major sporting events are becoming increasingly common, as they often bring forced relocations, surveillance, and rising rents. The future could either see stronger involvement of local communities—or a loss of legitimacy if the public perceives the events as elitist and exploitative.

Media consumption is changing: younger generations increasingly engage with sports online and in short formats. Why pay for expensive stadium visits when virtual reality and e-sports offer alternatives? Hybrid formats—smaller events with global streaming reach—may shape the future. The era of uncritically celebrated mega-sporting events appears to be ending. To survive, organizers must reduce costs, act ecologically responsibly, and ensure social justice. Otherwise, a gradual decline in significance is likely—favouring decentralized, sustainable sports formats. It could be the future lies not with grand prestige projects but with events that harmonize sport, society, and the environment.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup in the USA, Mexico, and Canada will undoubtedly trigger political debates—but in a different form and intensity than the controversial—and may be unique—2022 World Cup in Qatar. While the Qatar edition was primarily criticized for systematic human rights abuses and authoritarian structures, conflicts in North America will centre on other issues: social inequality, migration policy, climate protection, and racism. The crucial difference is that the three host countries are democracies with largely free media and active civil societies. This does not eliminate political attention but fundamentally changes the nature of the debate.

In Qatar, allegations of “sportswashing”—using a mega-event to distract from human rights problems and project a modern image—dominated discussions. In the USA, Canada, and Mexico, the focus will instead be on economic and tourism interests rather than image correction for an authoritarian regime. The awarding of the World Cup was also more transparent and followed new FIFA standards, unlike the controversial allocation to Qatar in 2022 or Russia in 2018, which were overshadowed by corruption allegations. Nonetheless, the 2026 World Cup will not be apolitical. A central point of contention is likely to be social inequality—particularly in the USA and Mexico, where expensive stadium projects are funded with public money while housing shortages and homelessness are ignored. Similar protests occurred during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Labour conditions for stadium staff could also come under scrutiny, especially if underpaid employees highlight their precarious situations. Migration policy is another potential area of conflict, particularly along the US-Mexico border. While the World Cup officially promotes “unity through football,” the USA continues to expand its border infrastructure. The treatment of fans without visas—especially from Latin America—may spark debates. The tournament’s climate impact will also face criticism: long distances between venues necessitate numerous domestic flights, and stadium energy consumption contradicts the hosts’ sustainability promises. In Canada, where environmental activism is deeply rooted, this could provoke protests. Societal issues such as racism and police violence may also emerge: in the USA, players might protest systemic racism, echoing

the NFL's "Take a Knee" demonstrations; in Mexico, ongoing homophobic chants and fan violence could be highlighted.

Nevertheless, the 2026 World Cup is expected to generate fewer scandals than the Qatar edition. Western media will remain critical but without the fundamental systemic scepticism that characterized coverage of Qatar. Moreover, FIFA has learned from recent PR disasters and will attempt to manage controversies through earlier dialogue with NGOs. Crucially, there is no authoritarian host serving as a focal "villain"—debates will focus on specific issues rather than overarching legitimacy concerns. Overall, the 2026 World Cup will be political, but in a different way than in Qatar. While Qatar provoked fundamental criticism of human rights violations and democratic deficits, conflicts in North America will reflect typical tensions in open societies—they highlight social and political challenges without turning the event itself into a symbol of systemic failure. Here, the World Cup is less a tool for PR and more a stage for raising awareness of societal issues. This may be the most significant difference: in democracies, sport can serve as a platform for progressive change, not just image management.

Future World Cups in 2030 and 2034 can also only be understood in the context of increasing politicization of mega-sporting events. These tournaments will not be merely arenas for sporting competition but multifunctional stages for global power projection, economic transformation, and cultural self-positioning. The 2030 World Cup is especially symbolic of globalization. With venues in Europe, Africa, and South America, it emphasizes the transnational dimension of football and deliberately connects to the centennial anniversary of the first tournament in Uruguay in 1930. Hosting across multiple countries aims not only to bridge continents but also to respond to growing criticism of the ecological and economic burden on single host nations. Nonetheless, this model will not be free of controversy, as logistics, cost distribution, and political instrumentalization by different national interests present significant challenges.

Even more consequential is the awarding of the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia, often regarded in academic debates as a litmus test for the credibility of sports federations, governments, and international organizations. In Saudi Arabia, the World Cup fits seamlessly into the "Vision 2030" program, through which the kingdom—similar to Qatar—aims to reduce economic dependence on raw materials, expand tourism, and reposition itself as a global hub for culture and sport. Investments in football clubs (e.g., via the Public Investment Fund in Newcastle United), hosting boxing matches, Formula 1 races, or e-sports tournaments, and bidding for world championships illustrate that sports policy is part of

a comprehensive strategy. In this sense, the 2034 World Cup can be seen as a driver for economic diversification and modernization: infrastructure investment, job creation, and expansion of international mobility are presented as core arguments by Saudi authorities.

However, the context in Saudi Arabia multiplies the deficits highlighted in Qatar. Here, the focus of international criticism is on women's rights, restrictions on political freedoms, and the persecution of dissidents. FIFA's decision to award the World Cup to Riyadh despite these shortcomings' points to structural problems in global sports governance, characterized by close entanglement between economic interests, geopolitical alliances, and the media-driven logic of mega-events.

Saudi Arabia's and other Arab countries' roles in international sport have grown substantially over the past two decades, reflecting deeper shifts in global power and communication structures. Sport is increasingly a geopolitical instrument and a medium for self-positioning in a multipolar world, not merely a cultural practice or economic sector. While European states dominated central stages and institutions of world sport for decades, influence is now shifting toward Gulf states, driven by massive investments, high-profile mega-events, and the creation of their own institutions. It is foreseeable that Gulf states will also host international sports federations, with Saudi Arabia occupying a key position.

Sport thus becomes a stage for symbolic diplomacy, where Saudi Arabia generates international visibility, promotes modernization narratives, and consolidates domestic loyalty. On the global stage, Arab countries increasingly not only assume hosting roles but also shape the rules of global sport. FIFA, UEFA, and other federations are deeply dependent on Arab capital and political support. This structural shift indicates a reorientation of sport: Europe is losing historical dominance, while the Global South—especially Gulf states—assumes a central role.

It remains to be seen whether Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries will assume a dual role in international sport: on one hand, as actors in emerging geopolitical sports diplomacy leveraging soft power, modernization, and economic transformation; on the other, as focal points for critical debates on human rights, governance, and the political instrumentalization of sport. In this ambivalence lies the true significance of their role: they exemplify the transformation of sport from a primarily European cultural asset to a global instrument of power in an increasingly multipolar, perhaps even fragmented, world order.

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# Between Scandals, Transformation, and Power Struggles: The Contested Legacy of the 2018 and 2022 World Cup's Awarding Process and FIFA's Elusive Reforms

# 2

Jürgen Mittag

## 1 Introduction: The Development of FIFA Between 2010 and 2022

In December 2010, a moment of historic significance for international football took place at FIFA's headquarters in Zurich: the global governing body of football awarded the hosting rights for the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups to Russia and Qatar, respectively. This dual decision not only marked a pivotal milestone in the organization's history but also reignited global debate on the politics of major sporting events. The allocation epitomised FIFA's expansive global ambitions while simultaneously exposing the increasing entanglement of sport, politics, and economic interests—a constellation that would culminate in the dramatic 2015 corruption scandal at the Zurich congress of FIFA.

From the outset, the decision—particularly in favour of Qatar—met with widespread criticism. While Russia was already perceived as a geopolitically assertive actor, Qatar was scrutinized for its extreme climate, lack of footballing tradition, and grave human rights concerns (Heerd, 2018; Chadwick et al., 2023; Ulrichsen, 2025). Allegations of corruption surrounding the bidding process emerged early

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on, voiced by both media and political observers. In retrospect, these suspicions proved emblematic of deeper structural deficiencies within FIFA by both investigative journalists and academics (Blake & Calvert, 2015; Chade, 2015; Jennings, 2015; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017; Mersiades, 2018; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

The events of 27 May 2015 marked a watershed moment: Swiss authorities, supported by the FBI, conducted a high-profile raid in Zurich's "Baur au Lac" hotel, arresting senior FIFA officials on charges of bribery, money laundering, and organized crime. U.S. prosecutors subsequently indicted 14 individuals, exposing a sprawling, systemic network of corruption in tournament, media rights, and marketing allocations. FIFA President Blatter came under intense pressure and, though denying wrongdoing, announced his resignation days after his re-election. His fall—and the simultaneous suspension of Michel Platini—plunged FIFA into a deep legitimacy crisis. Gianni Infantino, elected president in February 2016, presented himself as a reformer. While governance reforms followed—term limits, transformation of the Executive Committee into a Council, and compliance rules—critics viewed these as largely superficial (Chappelet et al., 2019). The 2018 and 2022 World Cups were ultimately held as planned and symbolized FIFA's new self-conception: a global actor positioning football as an instrument of geopolitical strategy and economic interest.

The tournaments themselves embodied this dynamic. Russia spent over \$13 billion, gaining global prestige despite uncertain economic benefits. In Qatar, over \$200 billion was invested, making it the most expensive World Cup ever—yet international protests over labour rights, gender inequality, and political repression persisted. FIFA responded with strategic messaging, emphasizing football's "transformative power," while critics accused the organization of enabling authoritarian regimes and prioritizing profit over principle. Gianni Infantino's close alignment with host nations and populist rhetoric deepened controversy, even as the tournaments were lauded for their sporting quality—most notably the 2022 final between Argentina and France, hailed as one of the greatest in football history.

This article examines key developments in FIFA's trajectory from 2010 to 2022, focusing on the 2010 bidding process, the 2015 corruption scandal, and subsequent governance reforms. It reveals a tension between entrenched structural deficiencies, reform discourse, and strategic power retention—while also highlighting FIFA's global ambitions and persistent ethical shortcomings. The 2015 scandal marked a critical rupture, yet meaningful structural transformation remained limited.

## 2 The Introduction of the Rotation System: New Approaches in Awarding Football World Cups

In light of the spectrum of decisions made in the field of sports policy, the awarding of major sporting events represents one of the most consequential (Gauthier, 2011; Gädeke, 2012; Mittag & Nieland, 2012; Trennt, 2012). Especially in the case of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), such decisions are accompanied by an exceptional degree of public attention. Even presidential elections or decisions regarding the admission of new member associations typically fail to attract as much interest as the decision to award a mega sporting event (Gruneau & Horne, 2017). This heightened attention can be explained by the far-reaching implications of such a decision—not only for the host city or country but also for the national federation acting as organizer. The awarding decision and the event itself significantly shape the public perception of the federation. Moreover, the financial revenues generated by the mega event substantially influence the association's operational capacity in the years that follow (Maenning & Zimbalist, 2012). The sporting competitions also leave a lasting impact on the development of the respective discipline. Even the commemorative and historical legacy of sports federations is often strongly influenced by such events (Horne, 2007; Grix & Lee 2013; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Grix & Grix, 2019).

In contrast to the event itself and the actual awarding process, the multi-year preparatory bidding phase remains relatively absent from the public consciousness. Given the significance of global sporting events, the awarding decision represents a strategic target for both the organizing federation and the prospective host country—one that is approached with immense financial and administrative investment. In recent decades, international governing bodies have established increasingly comprehensive, intricate, and tightly regulated requirements. However, no universally binding standards exist. Instead, bidding processes and evaluation criteria differ widely depending on the federation and the nature of the event (Büch et al., 2011, 2012; Hebbel-Seeger et al., 2016). One observable trend, however, is clear: in recent decades, both the complexity and the number of conflicts of interest associated with bidding processes have markedly increased.

Between 1950 and 1998, the men's FIFA World Cup was typically hosted alternately by European and Latin American federations. The only exception was in 1954 and 1958, when the tournament was held consecutively in Europe (Switzerland and Sweden, respectively). When the World Cup was awarded to Asia for the first time in 2002, then-FIFA President Sepp Blatter personally

advocated in 2000 for South Africa to host the 2006 tournament. However, in a highly contentious selection process, Germany won the final round by a narrow 12–11 vote—thanks in part to the controversial abstention of the New Zealand delegate. After South Africa’s bid failed, FIFA leadership introduced a rotational principle intended to ensure the inclusion of all six continental confederations, with the primary aim of securing an African host for the 2010 World Cup. This decision was formalized in August 2000 and implemented for the first time with the 2010 tournament. South Africa ultimately prevailed over Morocco in the first round of voting, following the withdrawal of bids from Tunisia and Libya. Due to the rotational principle, there were no rival bids from other confederations (Mittag & Ebbinghaus, 2017).

An even more restricted competition marked the selection process for the 2014 World Cup. The rotational system dictated that the host be chosen from the South American confederation, CONMEBOL. Although several countries expressed initial interest, only Brazil ultimately submitted a formal bid. As a result, FIFA found itself in a strategically unfavourable position, lacking leverage to pressure Brazil into submitting a bid aligned with FIFA’s expectations. The final decision to award Brazil the tournament was made on October 30, 2007, following a presentation by the Brazilian Football Confederation in Zurich. Despite frustrations within FIFA regarding its limited influence, Brazil’s status as the most successful footballing nation and the symbolic value of the CBF’s centenary in 2014 helped stave off initial criticism (Zirin, 2014).

FIFA itself acknowledged that the rotational principle led to a lack of genuine competition in the bidding process. Consequently, in October 2007, the FIFA Executive Committee unanimously agreed to reform the system ahead of the awarding of the 2018 and 2022 tournaments (Becker, 2013). For 2018, bids from federations representing the two most recent host continents were excluded; for 2022, only confederations that had hosted in 2014 were barred. As with previous tournaments, both award processes were marked by fierce competition and intensive lobbying, which ultimately shook FIFA to its foundations and whose repercussions are still being felt today. A key issue was that, until 2016, the power to award World Cups rested with the Executive Committee—a body that effectively operated as FIFA’s governing cabinet. The immense authority of this committee, its recruitment mechanisms, and the limited oversight it was subjected to are—similar to the IOC—widely seen as major causes of misconduct and corruption (Mallon, 2000; Maennig, 2005). These structural weaknesses brought FIFA under intense scrutiny, resulting in numerous criminal convictions and resignations among Executive Committee

members (Mittag & Nieland, 2016). According to current legal investigations, the awarding of the 1998 World Cup to France, 2002 to Japan and South Korea, 2006 to Germany, and 2010 to South Africa were all influenced—directly or indirectly—by questionable financial transactions (Weinreich, 2014).

Bidding nations for the FIFA World Cup are subject to an extensive set of obligations, including a formal bid agreement, a comprehensive bid dossier, and a legally binding hosting contract. By contrast, the internal procedural guidelines governing the awarding process remained vague for many years. It was only after the 2018/2022 bidding scandal that FIFA amended its statutes to introduce detailed reforms. Key innovations included the creation of a “Bid Evaluation Task Force” and the implementation of instruments such as compliance assessment, risk assessment, and technical evaluation reports. Most notably, from the 2026 World Cup onward, the decision-making authority was transferred from the Executive Committee (or the newly constituted Council) to the full FIFA Congress (FIFA, 2017). Nonetheless, the Council continues to play a role, mirroring IOC procedures. According to the updated procedural rules: “(a) Based on specific regulations issued by the Council, the FIFA General Secretariat shall establish a fair and transparent bidding process that invites all qualified member associations to submit bids, and that defines in detail the hosting requirements and evaluation criteria. (...) (c) The Council shall review the report and, in an open vote and in good conscience, select up to three bids to be submitted to the Congress for final decision. The result of each vote shall be published.” (FIFA, 2019, p. 65).

Furthermore, the statutes stipulate that “a Congress may determine the host for only one FIFA World Cup at a time,” and that “hosting rights shall not be awarded to members of the same confederation for two consecutive tournaments” (FIFA, 2019, p. 66). As a result, member associations of UEFA and AFC were not permitted to bid for the 2026 World Cup, since the 2018 and 2022 tournaments were held in Russia and Qatar, respectively.

The overview of the World Cup bidding procedures illustrates a substantial transformation. Like the IOC, FIFA now requires bidding nations to produce comprehensive application portfolios. Yet, in response to the 2018/22 scandal, FIFA has moved toward creating more transparent—rather than more flexible—frameworks. In the realm of football, continental confederations wield considerable influence, such that modified continental rotation has become a defining feature of the bidding process in the twenty-first century. This strategy also played a crucial role in the awarding of the 2030 and 2034 World Cups.

### **3 The Awarding of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups: A Spark of Global Controversy**

The awarding of the FIFA World Cups for 2018 and 2022 in December 2010 marked a historic departure from precedent: never before had FIFA awarded two tournaments simultaneously, and seldom had a decision by the international football governing body drawn such extensive global political and media attention. On 19 December 2008, during a meeting in Tokyo, the FIFA Executive Committee resolved to assign the hosting rights for both tournaments at the same time. The deadline for member associations to express their interest in hosting expired on 2 February 2009.

The initial situation was relatively clear-cut: under the revised rotation policy adopted in 2007, continental confederations that had hosted the previous two World Cups—Africa and South America—were excluded from the bidding process for the 2018 tournament. For the 2022 edition, only South American associations were barred from applying. However, due to intense competition from North America, Europe, and Asia, no African country submitted a bid for 2022, as the time since South Africa's hosting in 2010 was widely deemed too short. Moreover, bidders from the same confederation as the winner of the 2018 tournament were excluded from consideration for 2022. Based on this rotation principle—and the historical trend of every second World Cup being held in Europe—it was difficult to imagine three consecutive tournaments taking place outside the continent. Thus, it was broadly anticipated that Europe would host the 2018 World Cup, with the 2022 edition likely to be awarded to a country in Asia, Australia, or North America.

In April 2009, FIFA distributed the official bid registration agreement to all interested associations. This document outlined in detail the information, guarantees, and commitments required for the final bid dossier. The signed agreement was due back to FIFA by 11 December 2009. Initially, eleven countries declared their interest in hosting the tournament, including joint bids—such as those from Spain and Portugal and from Belgium and the Netherlands. FIFA ultimately accepted nine formal bids, with several nations applying for both 2018 and 2022. Indonesia's bid was rejected for failing to submit all mandatory documentation and government guarantees, while Mexico withdrew its application in September 2009 due to unresolved financial issues. The 2018 bid field was dominated by European nations—Belgium/Netherlands, England, Spain/Portugal, and Russia—while the 2022 contest was shaped by non-European contenders: Australia, Japan, Qatar, South Korea, and the United States.

From the outset, the bidding process was shaped by strategic alliances, geopolitical considerations, and extensive lobbying. Officially, FIFA conducted a thorough evaluation process, dispatching a technical committee to visit each bidding nation and compile reports assessing infrastructure, security, economic viability, and logistical capacity. Yet even at this stage, it became evident that technical assessments were not the decisive factor in the final decision-making. For instance, Qatar and Russia received lower marks than their rivals in several infrastructural areas—such as transport systems, hotel capacity, and climate—but nonetheless remained strong contenders.

The final decision was rendered by the FIFA Executive Committee on 2 December 2010 in Zurich. Of the 24 committee members, only 22 were eligible to vote after two had been suspended on corruption charges. Voting occurred in multiple secret ballots. A candidate required an absolute majority—at least 12 votes—to win. If no candidate reached this threshold in a round, the one with the fewest votes was eliminated, and voting continued. For the 2018 World Cup, Russia prevailed in the second round over England, Spain/Portugal, and Belgium/Netherlands. While Russia had long been considered a strong candidate, England's early elimination came as a surprise, especially given its technically superior dossier and high-profile support from Prime Minister David Cameron, Prince William, and David Beckham. For the 2022 tournament, Qatar was awarded hosting rights in the fourth round, defeating the United States 14 votes to 8, after Australia, Japan, and South Korea were eliminated in successive rounds.

The announcement of Russia and Qatar as hosts triggered immediate and intense international reactions. Russia's selection was interpreted by some commentators as geopolitically motivated—a signal that FIFA aligned itself with a broader “globalization agenda.” At the same time, concerns were raised about political freedoms, oligarchic influence, and press restrictions in the country. The decision in favour of Qatar provoked even more pronounced controversy and unprecedented public outcry. Lacking a significant football tradition and the necessary stadium infrastructure, Qatar was widely seen as an ill-suited host. Its extreme summer heat further disqualified it in the eyes of many, eventually prompting the unprecedented move to hold the 2022 tournament in winter.

Allegations of political interference and systematic bribery quickly gained traction. In subsequent years, investigative journalists and independent reports uncovered substantial indications of irregularities in the selection process.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the

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<sup>1</sup>In early May 2020, revelations by The New York Times brought to light that the votes of three FIFA officials—including Ricardo Teixeira and Nicolás Leoz—had been bought in order to support Qatar's bid. Without these three votes for Qatar, the result would have been

so-called “Garcia Report”—an internal investigation commissioned by FIFA to examine the integrity of the bidding process—garnered significant media attention. Although initially withheld from the public, a later partial release confirmed that external influences had affected both decisions. Qatar’s actions, including payments to politically connected consultants and the sponsorship of national football federations, were particularly controversial (Conn, 2017).

At the political level, reactions were divided. While the winning nations celebrated the decision as a historic achievement, losing bidders responded with frustration. The United States, in particular, suspected that geopolitical factors—such as Qatari investments in French media and the defence industry—had influenced the outcome. In response, the U.S. government mobilized considerable resources to investigate illicit financial transactions, culminating in the revelations that rocked the FIFA Congress in 2015. England denounced the decision as a “shameful day” for FIFA. In Western public discourse, the awards were frequently cited as evidence of dysfunctional governance within world football’s ruling body.

FIFA, for its part, sought to justify the decisions through the concept of “football diplomacy.” Then-President Joseph Blatter described the selections as a leap into new regions and emphasized the necessity of globalizing football beyond its traditional markets. However, many observers greeted this rationale with scepticism, noting that it coincided with the growing influence of authoritarian regimes in global sports governance.

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## 4 The 2010s: FIFA’s Decade of Scandal

Since its founding in 1904, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has transformed from a recognition-seeking international organization into a globally dominant monopoly (Murray, 1999; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Eisenberg, 2006a). Its flagship product, the FIFA World Cup, garners worldwide attention and generates immense revenue (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1998; Eisenberg, 2006b;

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a 11:11 tie, giving the decisive vote to the FIFA president. Since Sepp Blatter had voted for the United States to host the tournament, the World Cup would have been awarded to the USA. Despite the revelations, there was no serious consideration of stripping Qatar of the World Cup. In addition to potential financial losses for FIFA due to possible multibillion-dollar compensation claims, the construction of the stadiums in Qatar was already too far advanced. Moreover, the United States had little interest in pursuing legal action, as it had already been awarded the hosting rights for the 2026 World Cup. Another reason, according to whistleblower Bonita Mersiades—who was part of the Australian delegation in 2010—was that all bidding nations had at least attempted to buy votes prior to the decision.

Rinke & Schiller, 2014). At the same time, FIFA has increasingly become a focal point of criticism and is widely perceived as a symbol of the growing loss of trust in organized sport (Tomlinson & Sugden, 2003; Jennings, 2006, 2010).

A turning point in FIFA's development was marked by the presidency of João Havelange. Under his leadership (1974–1998), FIFA pursued a strategy of aggressive expansion (Tomlinson, 1994; Darby, 2003, 2008). The number of participating nations in the World Cup was successively increased (1982: 24, 1998: 32), and new tournament formats were introduced, including the Youth World Cup (1977), the Women's World Cup (1991), the Futsal World Cup (1989), and the Club World Cup (2000). These developments significantly promoted the global dissemination of football, particularly in emerging and developing countries (Cornelissen, 2010a, b; Bason et al., 2018; Grix et al., 2019; Mittag, 2020). In these regions, FIFA's development programs played a crucial role in establishing football as a truly universal sport. Simultaneously, the economic significance of the organization grew dramatically. Increasing sponsorship revenues and the sale of broadcasting rights turned FIFA into a multibillion-dollar enterprise. Between 2019 and 2022 alone, it generated €7.08 billion, predominantly through the commercialization of the men's World Cup.

Legally, FIFA is structured as an association under Swiss private law. Its governance structure is comparatively lean: the FIFA Congress and the Executive Committee—renamed the Council in 2016—serve as its principal decision-making bodies. The President chairs the Executive Committee/Council and represents the association externally. Supporting these are the General Secretariat and approximately 25 standing committees.

The Congress, in which all member associations are represented, constitutes FIFA's supreme governing body. It decides, among other matters, on amendments to the statutes and the admission of new members. Until the reform of the World Cup bidding process, decisions regarding host countries—such as those for Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022—were made exclusively by the Executive Committee. Within the Congress, each association has one vote, regardless of size or number of members (One-Federation—One-Vote). This principle, reminiscent of the U.S. Senate, results in disproportionate influence for numerous small associations. For instance, Montserrat (approx. 5000 inhabitants) or American Samoa (approx. 2000 members) possess the same voting power as the German Football Association (DFB), which has over seven million members. This dynamic significantly amplifies the political weight of small associations in international sports governance.

FIFA's organizational structure can be likened to a hierarchical pyramid, headed by a kind of "government" composed of the President and the Executive Committee. This small group makes all essential decisions, while the Congress, which con-

venes annually, has only limited influence. This concentration of power enables a handful of officials to exert substantial influence with minimal oversight. Especially problematic is the fact that even the Ethics Committee is appointed by the Executive Committee, rendering independent oversight of FIFA's leadership virtually impossible.

For years, the awarding of World Cup tournaments and the control of financial resources constituted the central instruments of power for FIFA's leadership. Through its control of funds, the executive leadership could suppress or silence opposition. This became particularly evident during presidential elections, which the incumbent could influence with the support of the Executive Committee and the One-Federation—One-Vote-system. Of the 211 member associations (2025), around 130—primarily from smaller states and associations, especially in Africa and the Caribbean—depend on financial support from FIFA's Zurich headquarters. Since 1998, FIFA has guaranteed these associations an annual subsidy under the Financial Assistance Programme (FAP), supplemented by special payments, often distributed in the lead-up to election congresses, and project-based funding from FIFA development programs. In light of these guaranteed multimillion-dollar disbursements, the leadership can count on the loyalty of numerous smaller associations. Accordingly, past incumbents have consistently relied on the support of AFC and CONCACAF members, while UEFA has typically acted as a counterweight to the FIFA elite. Given that the votes of smaller associations carry the same weight as those of larger ones, UEFA is structurally less influential than Africa, particularly when supported by Asia and North and Central America.

This constellation also explains the success of Sepp Blatter, who deliberately relied on the support of associations from developing and emerging countries. Blatter's rise began in 1975 as Director of FIFA's Development Program, a role supported by Adidas executive Horst Dassler. After serving as General Secretary and Executive Director, Blatter was elected President in 1998 with the backing of his predecessor, João Havelange. His political ascent within FIFA was significantly facilitated by the support of Qatari official Mohamed Bin Hammam, then President of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and a member of FIFA's Executive Committee. Bin Hammam played a pivotal role in Blatter's 1998 election and remained an influential ally thereafter.

In 2002, however, internal opposition emerged in the form of Michel Zen-Ruffinen, FIFA's former General Secretary and once close confidant. He accused Blatter of financial mismanagement, prompting eleven members of the Executive Committee—led by UEFA President Lennart Johansson—to initiate legal action. Simultaneously, CAF President Issa Hayatou officially ran against Blatter. Despite this, Blatter managed to secure re-election in the first round, aided by Bin Hammam,

who provided both financial and logistical support, including a private jet. Blatter won with 139 out of 195 votes, achieving the necessary two-thirds majority. The legal actions were subsequently dropped or not pursued further by the Swiss authorities, an internal investigation was blocked by Blatter's veto, and Zen-Ruffinen was removed from office. The Executive Committee once again unanimously backed Blatter and it seemed that nobody could hold FIFA accountable (Pielke, 2013).

At the 2007 FIFA Congress, Blatter was re-elected unopposed. However, signs of a rift with Bin Hammam began to emerge. The latter proposed a 12-year term limit for the presidency, which was interpreted as an attempt to pursue the top post himself. Although Blatter had allegedly hinted that Bin Hammam might succeed him, he showed no willingness to step aside and announced his intention to seek another term. The break became evident in 2009 when Blatter supported Bin Hammam's rival in the AFC presidential election, sparking a fierce power struggle. Both men sought to secure the votes of the confederations: Blatter relied on UEFA, CAF, and CONMEBOL (the latter due in part to his role in awarding the 2010 World Cup to South Africa), while Bin Hammam leaned on AFC support. CONCACAF, led by the influential but controversial Jack Warner, was seen as the decisive voting bloc. Both candidates promised financial incentives: Blatter pledged \$1 million per association from FIFA funds, while Bin Hammam allegedly offered \$40,000 per delegate from his personal resources (Conn, 2017).

These alleged payments became the subject of both public and internal investigations. Following accusations from CONCACAF General Secretary Chuck Blazer and media reports, FIFA's Ethics Committee launched an inquiry. Bin Hammam withdrew his candidacy in the face of the allegations, while the Ethics Committee found no wrongdoing on Blatter's part. In the 2011 election, Blatter was re-elected unopposed, securing 186 out of 203 votes and beginning his fourth term, once again consolidating his authority while side-lining opposition.

Following Blatter's controversial re-election in 2011, FIFA's reputation was deeply tarnished. Even within the organization, a "point of no return" was acknowledged (FIFA World, 2011), prompting the launch of a reform agenda titled "Road Map of FIFA Good Governance." Blatter admitted in a column that the preceding months had been "the most difficult in FIFA's over 100-year history" (Zeit Online, 06.11.2011), while also attempting to project optimism at a press conference: FIFA was not corrupt—only some of its members were—and it was time to move forward (Kicker Online, 21.10.2011).

The proposed reforms included the establishment of a "Good Governance Committee" led by Swiss criminal law expert Mark Pieth and the creation of several task forces. These addressed topics such as amendments to FIFA's statutes

(Theo Zwanziger), rule changes (Franz Beckenbauer), and transparency (Domenico Scala). The Ethics Committee, under former U.S. prosecutor Michael Garcia, was also tasked with investigating World Cup bidding practices. Initially, these measures had significant public impact. The commissions presented a series of proposals that, if implemented, could have led to structural renewal of the organization (Pieth, 2011, 2014, 2016). However, closer examination revealed that implementation fell far short of expectations. Neither age nor term limits for the presidency were introduced, nor was the Congress granted the proposed role in nominating executive members. The media spoke of a “shrinkage reform” (FAZ, 28.02.2013) and a “FIFA farce” (Die Zeit, 06.06.2013).

Particularly controversial was the investigation into the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bids. While Garcia’s report contained indications of irregularities, Hans-Joachim Eckert, head of the adjudicatory chamber, found no violations of the rules (Zeit Online, 18.11.2014). Only one substantial reform emerged: beginning with the 2026 World Cup, the Congress—not the Council—would decide on the host. Resistance to reform, however, was not limited to FIFA’s leadership. Many member associations also obstructed change. For instance, the German FA (DFB) opposed binding ethics rules (Welt, 30.03.2014), and an ongoing power struggle between UEFA and FIFA further impeded institutional reform. While the initial inclusion of external experts like Pieth and Garcia marked a historic shift in FIFA’s previously opaque structure, these efforts ultimately encountered clear limitations. The resignations of key reformers, such as Pieth, Garcia, and Sylvia Schenk (Transparency International), underscored the absence of genuine political will for independent investigation or long-term reform.

Like many other sports leaders, Blatter relied on the principle of sports autonomy, stating: “If we have problems in the family, we solve them in the family and do not go to another family. Everything that happens in football, and all difficulties, should be resolved within football’s own jurisdiction and not brought before ordinary courts. That is no longer our family.” In 2015, he announced his candidacy under the claim of establishing “a new FIFA” (Handelsblatt, 12.06.2014).

Though Blatter was re-elected, the FIFA Congress in Zurich was overshadowed by an unprecedented scandal in international sport. On the morning of May 27, 2015, Swiss police executed a dramatic operation at the luxury Baur au Lac hotel, arresting six senior FIFA officials based on a U.S. extradition request dated May 21. The suspects were accused of having systematically accepted bribes totaling more than \$150 million over more than two decades, dating back to 1991. These payments were allegedly made by media and marketing firms in exchange for lucrative rights to tournaments in North and South America (Mittag & Nieland, 2016; Meier & Hölzen, 2017).

The corruption scandal directly implicated FIFA, as many of the indicted officials held positions within both FIFA's Executive Committee and its continental confederations (CONMEBOL, CONCACAF). Investigations revealed that corruption reached the highest leadership levels: former President João Havelange had also accepted bribes related to marketing rights. Investigative journalism had already shown that FIFA's leadership was aware of corrupt practices in the confederations but deliberately tolerated them. The involved officials played key roles in securing political support within FIFA and thereby solidifying their power (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2003; Jennings, 2006). These findings point not to isolated incidents but to a systemic problem embedded in FIFA's organizational culture.

When extensive investigations were launched and President Sepp Blatter announced his resignation on June 2, 2015—just 4 days after his re-election—a rupture occurred in the global football power structure. This shift was largely due to U.S. involvement: through whistleblowers and plea bargains associated with organized crime, U.S. authorities uncovered extensive bribery schemes involving FIFA and its confederations. Their efforts were aided by the fact that many transactions passed through U.S. banks and that Switzerland, following FIFA's self-disclosure, agreed to cooperate. An additional motive may have been the disappointment that the 2022 World Cup had been awarded to Qatar instead of the expected favorite, the United States.

In the months that followed, FIFA's foundations were shaken. Most Executive Committee members became subjects of external investigations or were internally suspended. In 2016, UEFA General Secretary Gianni Infantino was elected President, with his term limited to a maximum of three terms and focused mainly on representational duties. FIFA adopted a comprehensive reform package: the Executive Committee was replaced with a 36-member Council functioning as a supervisory board. This body lost its right to decide on World Cup hosts, a power now assigned to the Congress. Furthermore, gender quotas and integrity checks were introduced.

However, little remains of the high hopes for reform. The FIFA President continues to hold substantial power. Infantino not only increased payments to national associations during his unopposed re-election by acclamation but also pushed for an expansion of World Cup teams to 48. While Secretary General Fatma Samoura announced her resignation after 7 years, Infantino declared that his first term—from early 2016 to mid-2019—should not count as a full term. The Council ruled that it could now determine the composition of the Ethics Committee itself; the following year, its two chairpersons were dismissed.

Given the ongoing appeal of the World Cup and the limited leverage of media, sponsors, and fans over international sports organizations, and in light of the United

States scaling back its scrutiny after being awarded the 2026 World Cup, many observers remain sceptical regarding the prospects for further reform. Although comparable trends can be observed in other international sports federations—two-thirds of presidents in 40 international Olympic federations run unopposed—some have nonetheless implemented more fundamental reforms in recent years.

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## 5 Conclusions: Potential and Limits of Good Governance in Global Football

In retrospect, the 2010 World Cup awarding decision can be seen as the starting point of a profound crisis within FIFA—a crisis that culminated in the corruption scandal of 2015 and placed the organization under sustained pressure to reform. The selection of Russia and Qatar thus not only marked a geostrategic paradigm shift in global sport but also signalled the onset of a new discourse on morality, power, and responsibility in international football.

The reputation of international sport was severely damaged by FIFA's conduct between 2010 and 2022. What emerged were no longer isolated transgressions by individuals, but rather structural democratic deficits within international sports federations. While earlier analyses predominantly focused on the personal misconduct of individual officials, attention has increasingly shifted toward systemic deficiencies and the lack of good governance. In the context of sport, *good governance* refers to the obligation of federations to establish and monitor transparent, accountable, and effective decision-making structures (Chappelet, 2017). Despite extensive discussions in the media, academia, and political circles, significant implementation gaps persist—particularly at the international level, where economic dependency on major events significantly limits external leverage (Gill et al., 2019).

A core concern of reform efforts is the institutional democratization of sports governance. Essential to this are general, free, and secret elections within the bodies of sports federations, term limits, quorum requirements, and representative compositions of governing bodies that include players, referees, coaches, and administrative personnel (Alm, 2013). Yet the structural oversight of international sports organizations remains problematic, as no superior authority exists to enforce reforms (Geeraert, 2015, 2016). Instead, effective control relies on the interplay of multiple actors: national federations that can initiate reforms within global organizations; state actors such as Switzerland, which can exert influence through legal frameworks; sponsors who may apply pressure due to reputational risks; and civil

society groups and fan initiatives that demand change through protest (Meier & Garcia, 2015; Geeraert, 2019).

However, the heterogeneity of interests and the considerable autonomy of the federations hinder the development of a coherent reform strategy. The financial strength of sports organizations acts as a stabilizing force for existing power structures and impedes profound structural transformation (Brooks et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, a timely democratization of global sport appears unlikely. Rather, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the current reactive and fragmented control mechanisms will allow the democratic deficits of international sport to persist for the foreseeable future.

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## **Part II**

# **Reflections from the Perspective of Sports Communication**



# Boycott or Not!? Exploring the Mediatization of Sports Through a Comparison of the 2022 Qatar World Cup Coverage Between FIFA and Journalistic Media Outlets

Thomas Birkner, Miriam Anna Moderegger, and Pauline Reichenberger

## 1 Introduction

The mediatization of sports has a long history, understood as a “process of growing media influence” (Strömbäck et al., 2016) in sports (Frandsen, 2020). This also applies to football, which has become a global enterprise and one of the most popular sports in the world. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup has become a media event and is subject to extensive journalistic coverage. With the latest wave of mediatization (Frandsen, 2016), sports organizations and athletes are able to communicate autonomously and bypass journalistic media (Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). This new situation seems to be of special relevance when the World Cup received heavy criticism from the public. That was the case with the 2022 World Cup in men’s football in Qatar. While fans especially in Western countries were about to boycott the World Cup, just before the start of the tournament, the president of FIFA, Gianni Infantino, claimed that it would be “the best World Cup ever;” and by the end of the tournament, he considered his prediction to be realized (Peach, 2022).

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Prior to the World Cup, many people around the world considered Qatar to be the worst location for such an event due to the country's appalling working conditions (Guardian, 2021), discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, restrictions on critical investigative reporting on the ground, the tournament's negative effects on the environment, and other problems, including corruption. The World Cup in Qatar was accompanied by political controversies. Not only was the Qatar government criticized, but FIFA was also attacked for giving Qatar the rights to host the 2022 World Cup in 2010. Since then, the topic of FIFA corruption has rapidly spread and remained on the table until the start of the 2022 World Cup. Due to these issues, a campaign against the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, including a call for a boycott, emerged in various Western nations, including Austria. Under this pressure, critical sports journalists in Germany and most other countries opted against a boycott and chose to cover the event critically rather than handing the field over to FIFA (Bauer, 2022; Köster, 2022).

This study examines how four selected Austrian journalistic media outlets, as well as FIFA itself, dealt with critical issues in their coverage of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The overall research question reads as follows: *How did Austrian newspapers and magazines cover the 2022 World Cup compared with its organizer, FIFA?*

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## 2 Theoretical Framework

The concept of mediatization has frequently been used to examine the processes of sports communication between the media and sports (Birkner, 2023). Mediatization is understood as “social and cultural changes that are defined as long-term structural transformations in other social and cultural fields,” such as sports (Frandsen, 2016, p. 386). Sport has a long tradition of mediatization (Frandsen, 2020) and the interdependencies of media and sports are more than obvious (Bölz, 2018; Rowe, 2016). In the field of sports, as in other fields, social media has become a “gamechanger,” giving clubs, for example, an advantage in their communication over the media (Horky et al., 2017).

Social media influences sports journalism at various levels, such as in marketing, audience building, distribution of stories, research, coverage, increasing relevance, sharing, and collegiality (Horky et al., 2017, pp. 4–6). There can be direct exchanges between athletes, federations, clubs, fans, and journalists. In addition, the dissemination of information is no longer limited to traditional mass media. Through social media, clubs, associations, and teams have the opportunity to communicate internally and externally without detours. In a recently published special

issue in *Communication and Sport* on “Sport and Mediatization: Sports Events and Cultures Across the World,” Peter English investigated “Sports Newsrooms Versus In-House Media: Cheerleading and Critical Reporting in News and Match Coverage” (English, 2021). He discussed the “often-opposing ambitions of in-house media and sports journalism newsrooms,” which “highlight a contest over boundaries” (English, 2021, p. 854).

The process of mediatization has quantitative and qualitative dimensions, both of which we are interested in. We determine how critical the coverage by Austrian media was before, during, and after the tournament, assuming that FIFA completely excludes critical aspects in their posts and tweets. Moreover, we examine the nature of the critique and how this was shown in the coverage.

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### 3 Literature Review

The Football World Cup is a mediated mega-event, one of the “high holidays of mass communication” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 1). However, the Qatar World Cup is not the first sporting event to be the subject of critical public and media debate (Schramm et al., 2018), following the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, which was marred by debates about the use of taxpayers’ money, alleged corruption and the forced relocation of Brazilians (Ihle et al., 2017; Schallhorn, 2017), and the controversial mega-events in Russia in 2014 and 2018. The 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi and the 2018 World Cup in Russia were criticized for similar issues to those surrounding the Qatar World Cup: in addition to the questionable human and labor rights situation, there was also the waste of financial resources that were urgently needed in other parts of the country and the environmental impact of the event (Alekseyeva, 2014; Hutchings et al., 2015; Müller, 2015). In addition, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the subsequent EU sanctions have cast a shadow over the 2018 World Cup (Arnold, 2021). Although these issues have been discussed, particularly in the Western media, Gary Lineker, former player and English sports commentator, reflected on his own lack of social responsibility in Russia, testifying to sportswashing and the lack of contextualization of the event off the field, announcing not to headline the 2022 World Cup (Kwai, 2022).

In order to prevent or curb such sportswashing in Qatar, the call for a boycott of the event was not only made by football fans but also by the Western media: 79% of Austrians wanted sponsors and companies to boycott, 72% would have liked a media boycott (Wittmann, 2022). The weekly newspaper *Falter* ended up not reporting on the tournament, claiming “Nothing speaks in favor of [talking about] this tournament” (Matzinger, 2022). The sports journalists’ challenge to establish

public awareness in the societal sphere of sport becomes particularly apparent during such mega-events (Bölz, 2018). The interdependence “between the sport and media and between practicing [sic] journalists and the sport sources on which they rely” leads to a tension between critical and uncritical reporting (Rowe, 2016, p. 526). In their analysis of international news networks’ coverage of the World Cup bid bribery allegations, Samuel-Azran et al. (2016) found heavily varying sentiment towards Qatar, especially surrounding the responsible actors. Therefore, our first research interest is the extent to which Austrian media report (critically) on the World Cup.

Although Austrian journalists see themselves as “detached observers” (Lohmann & Seethaler, 2016, p. 2), sports journalism in general was found to focus on game results only and rely on a limited set of sources, “reluctant or ill-prepared” to tackle some of the more challenging responsibilities associated with being part of the ‘fourth estate’ (Rowe, 2016, p. 525). While public interest in upcoming events is very high and controversies yield a high news value, the media focus of past sporting mega events shifted to match reports and results as soon as the competition started (Beck, 2017). This leads to our second research interest, which is to analyze whether the discussion of controversial and critical issues changes to sports news once the tournament is kicked off.

The World Cup creates a complex, layered, mediated experience for audiences and establishes a “mediated collective identity” (Haynes & Boyle, 2017, p. 97). Actors that “look like journalism” (Maares & Hanusch, 2022, p. 1270) benefit from digitalization and individualization of media: Sports organizations such as the FIFA use social media, and even create their own In-House media, for the marketing of their events and their brand, establishment of trust and support of fans and athletes and the strategic distribution of selected information (Horky et al., 2017). Via In-House-“Newsrooms” and Social Media, players, teams and big organizations like FIFA are enabled to bypass (critical) journalism and subsequently control the “flow and shape of information” (English, 2021; Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). This fragmentation of the media landscape leads to blurring boundaries between the sport and the media and enables audiences to follow their preferred sport(smen) even without journalists, while also disconnecting them from journalistic debate and its fact checking mechanisms (Suggs, 2015). Therefore, as our last research interest, we want to explore whether the FIFA addresses critical and controversial topics around the World Cup in their Instagram and Twitter content.

## 4 Method

Content analysis was conducted to answer the question of how Austrian newspapers and magazines covered the 2022 World Cup in comparison to FIFA. Following an multimethod research design combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, the content was analyzed qualitatively and scored quantitatively to answer the overall research question. Content analysis involves abstracting individual media objects (Brosius et al., 2022) by summarizing the text contents and detecting core statements:

1. summarizing the contents of the text and detecting core statements,
2. clarifying complex or difficult sections, and
3. structuring the text by creating and assigning categories (Mayring, 2020).

In research practice, this means that qualitative content analysis is conducted using a classical rule-bound procedure that focuses on understanding and describing communication processes (Mayring, 2014). The findings are then assessed quantitatively to determine the trends and patterns in the research material (Rössler, 2017). As a result, the openness and objectivity of understanding and describing contents and contexts (Kuckartz, 2019), which are characteristic of qualitative content analysis, can be combined with the systematic nature of the quantitative approach (Rössler, 2017). Another benefit of this approach is the flexibility of the category system. Content analysis can easily be adapted to the object of study, either by creating categories deductively, based on the state of research, or inductively, based on the sample and recurring patterns (Mayring, 2014). This can be of particular advantage when studying trends or case-specific situations, as was the case in this study.

### 4.1 Sample

To obtain a broad impression of the Austrian media coverage of the World Cup, research materials were obtained from four different media outlets: *Ballesterer*, a football magazine with a circulation of 20,000 copies per issue and 10 editions per year (Ballesterer Zeitschriftenverlag GmbH, 2023); *Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)*, a regional daily newspaper reaching 31% of readers in the Salzburg region every day; *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria's most popular daily tabloid with a daily net reach of

22%; and *Der Standard*, a supraregional newspaper with a 7% net reach (Verein Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analysen, 2022).

For the three newspapers, the e-papers were analyzed from October 23, 2022 to January 15, 2023. The 3 months that made up the analysis period were split into three parts: the period *before* the World Cup, which began on October 23 and ended with the kick-off on November 20; the period *during* the World Cup, which was from the kick-off on November 20 to the final whistle on December 18; and the period *after* the World Cup, which started after the final whistle and ended on January 15.

To investigate the FIFA coverage, the official Instagram and Twitter accounts (@fifaworldcup) of FIFA were studied during the same period. The Instagram posts and Twitter tweets of the *Kronen Zeitung*, *Der Standard*, *Ballesterer*, and *Salzburger Nachrichten* accounts on the topic of the World Cup were also analyzed to complement the sample and compare how social media was used during this international event. *Ballesterer* published only two issues during the research period, the one that was concerned with the World Cup was part of the sample. *Ballesterer's* blog on the World Cup, which was published in cooperation with the online newspaper *Zackzack*, was included in the analysis. Table 3.1 shows an overview of the sample in the three periods.

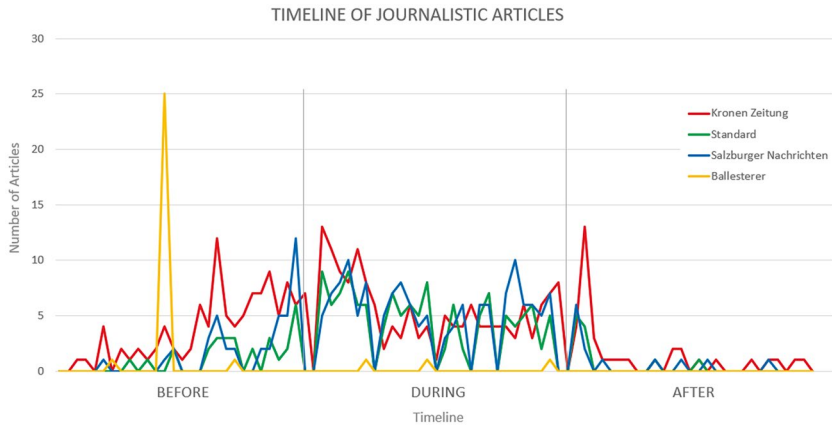
## 4.2 Procedure

This study was carried out using the media database *APA DeFacto Library* to collect newspaper and magazine articles. As stated above, texts published in the print editions of the *Ballesterer*, the *Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)*, the *Kronen Zeitung*, and *Der Standard* between October 23, 2022 and January 15, 2023 that were associated with the keywords “WM Katar” (World Cup Qatar) formed the basis of the research. This was followed by the elimination of duplicates and the removal of texts whose main topic was not the World Cup. Taken from the controversies about FIFA, Qatar as a country, and the World Cup itself that were revealed by non-government organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022) and international investigative journalists (e.g., BBC, 2010; SRF, 2022; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021; WDR, 2022) before the event, categories were developed around the different forms of critical coverage and sports news. In the course of the analysis, these categories were refined inductively. MAXQDA software was used to assign the categories to the media content. Quantitative comparability was ensured by assigning qualitative categories only once per article.

Data were extracted from the social media profiles of journalistic media and FIFA. These data were analyzed based on keywords using the same deductive cat-

**Table 3.1** Sample Overview

		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	25	0	0
	Blog	2	3	0
	Twitter	17	8	4
	Instagram	15	8	2
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	42	144	13
	Twitter	11	137	1
	Instagram	1	2	1
Kronen Zeitung	Print	108	157	36
	Twitter	3	17	2
	Instagram	8	76	30
Der Standard	Print	29	127	11
	Twitter	14	21	2
	Instagram	4	3	1
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	563	2947	441
	Instagram	472	1452	407



**Fig. 3.1** Timeline of Journalistic Articles

egories and approach as the analysis of journalistic media. As the research progressed, categories were added inductively to capture the trends and particularities of social media content.

Figure 3.1 shows the temporal distribution of the articles in different media. The public and journalistic interest in the World Cup is clearly demonstrated by an increase in coverage around the tournament.

## 5 Results

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to understand the extent and manner in which the journalistic media addressed critical issues surrounding the Qatar World Cup. In order to answer the research question:

*RQ: How and how much did the journalistic media cover critical issues, such as human rights, corruption, discrimination, climate change, and media censorship?*

The study analyzed newspaper articles based on seven categories: media censorship, allegations of corruption and fraud by FIFA and Qatar, climate, human rights and discrimination, protests and political statements, FIFA as a source, and match coverage. The last two categories were included to enable a comparison between critical and non-critical coverage during the tournament. After presenting the findings in the seven categories, two assumptions regarding the research question will be discussed. Firstly, the assumption that FIFA excludes critical issues from its coverage of the tournament, and secondly, that the critical coverage changes to sports news once the tournament has started.

### 5.1 Media Censorship

Overall, the category of media interest was found to play only a minor role in all four newspapers. Censorship is generally described as a procedure, not necessarily governmental, aimed at controlling or suppressing information or other media content (Laudien, 2021). *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported in advance that Qatar had published very strict guidelines for journalists. According to these guidelines, it is forbidden to show private rooms or the accommodation of guest workers, government buildings, churches, universities, hospitals, and private companies (Hanfeld, 2022). The category of media censorship includes mentions of FIFA's media regulations, Qatar's media regulations and press freedom, and incidents involving journalists.

Throughout the period under review, media censorship played only a small role (Table 3.2) and was limited to reporting on restricted press freedom in Qatar or the working conditions of journalists. For example, *Salzburger Nachrichten* reported on the harsh treatment of journalists by security forces, while *Ballesterer* reported that journalists were denied access to the stadium by security forces. *Kronen Zeitung* highlighted the frustration of journalists: "In particular, the restricted freedom of movement in the country makes the reporters' blood boil" (K57 [translated by the authors]).

**Table 3.2** Media Censorship

Media Censorship		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	6	0	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	4	1	0
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	4	0	0
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Der Standard	Print	0	4	0
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

## 5.2 Climate

Criticism of major sporting events often relates to environmental degradation, waste of resources, and the negative impact of major events on the climate (Schallhorn, 2020). In particular, the World Cup, one of the world's largest sporting events, is always likely to be at the center of sustainability discussions. For the World Cup in Qatar, eight new stadiums were built, which might not be used after. In addition, the World Cup was held in winter and in air-conditioned stadiums due to climatic conditions (MacInnes, 2022; Syal, 2022). The climate category includes reports on potential or expected climate damage caused by the World Cup, discussions on Qatar's climate conditions and FIFA's greenwashing, mentions of the resources needed to host the World Cup, and presentation of alternatives, solutions, climate-friendly behavior, or initiatives.

As shown in Table 3.3, the climate category was mostly mentioned before and during the tournament. After the World Cup was over, the topic disappeared. The coverage focused on four areas of climate: climatic conditions in Qatar, sustainability initiatives, greenwashing, and resources. *Der Standard* reported critically on the issue in several articles. For example, it published an article by climate researcher

**Table 3.3** Climate

Climate		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	8	0	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	2	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	5	4	0
	Twitter	1	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	17	7	2
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	1	0
Der Standard	Print	8	5	3
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	1	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

Helga Kromp-Kolb, who criticized the World Cup and FIFA’s claim that the World Cup was climate neutral. In another article, *Der Standard* reported that one million trees would be planted in Qatar to compensate for the World Cup but that watering them would be extremely expensive, pointing out the multiple instances of deception in what was claimed to be the “first carbon-neutral World Cup.” *Der Standard* also addressed the waste of resources and called for economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and ecological sustainability to be at the center of future hosting decisions. *Kronen Zeitung* repeatedly questioned the true climate neutrality of the World Cup, focusing on the “ecologically questionable stadium open-air cooling systems” (K3 [translated by the authors]). The timing of the tournament in the winter was also criticized. *Salzburger Nachrichten* was critical of shuttle flights for fans, calling them “a climate-related fiasco” (SN 99 [translated by the authors]). Owing to Qatar’s small size, many fans and officials stayed in neighboring countries and took shuttle flights to attend the games. Similar to *Kronen Zeitung*, *Salzburger Nachrichten* frequently mentioned the unusual timing of the tournament. *Ballesterer* focused on Qatar’s climate efforts and greenwashing. Climate-damaging behavior was mentioned but was frequently not labeled as such.

### 5.3 Alleged Corruption and Fraud

In the run-up to the World Cup, allegations of corruption surrounding the World Cup allocation in December 2010 caused discontent. Many were surprised that a country without a domestic league and that did not even have enough football stadiums could secure hosting rights. Although FIFA initially rejected Qatar's bid internally, the Gulf state was awarded hosting rights in 2010 (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021). Schallhorn and Mutz (2022) explained that autocratic states use the hosting of major sporting events as a way of "sportswashing". Sportswashing is defined as "the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information" (Bergkvist & Skeseid, 2024, p. 1) and aims to improve a state's public reputation (Mabon, 2022). In the analyzed media outlets, mentions of corruption allegations or investigations, as well as references to key people and events related to corruption allegations, served as indicators. The coverage deals with sportswashing, the World Cup allocation process, and its guidelines allegedly bought fans, European Union (EU) espionage, and the link between Qatar and the EU.

All four of the analyzed media outlets dealt with alleged corruption and fraud by either FIFA or Qatar (Table 3.4). The focus of media attention was mainly on the corruption allegations surrounding Qatar's World Cup bid. For example, before the World Cup, *Ballesterer* reported that 22 officials were involved in the allocation process, "most of whom are now suspended, charged with alleged corruption, or in prison" (B26 [translated by the authors]). *Kronen Zeitung* mentioned the corruption allegations but did not go into detail, except to say that there were seemingly paid fans in the stadiums. They were allegedly paid to report positive experiences during the tournament or to create a spectacle during the Ecuador game. *Salzburger Nachrichten* highlighted bribery and sportswashing within FIFA, which facilitated the involvement of dictatorships in hosting major football events. The newspaper also mentioned espionage allegations against Qatar. *Salzburger Nachrichten* and *Der Standard* reported on the corruption scandal in the EU Parliament involving former vice president Eva Kaili that was discovered during the World Cup. The fact that Qatar allegedly paid the politician and her circle to speak positively about the country in the EU Parliament was often linked to the World Cup and the alleged "bought" bid. *Der Standard* critically reflected on the cost-benefit equation for the football team of the host nation: "Qatar secured the World Cup under dubious circumstances, spending €200 billion, building six new stadiums and renovating two, constructing countless hotels from scratch, sacrificing thousands of migrant workers' lives and accepting the scorn of many football fans, only to lose 2-0 to Ecuador" (S134 [translated by the authors]).

**Table 3.4** Alleged Corruption and Fraud

Alleged Corruption and Fraud		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	9	1	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	0	1	0
	Instagram	2	0	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	12	10	0
	Twitter	1	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	1
Kronen Zeitung	Print	18	11	5
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	1	0
Der Standard	Print	7	2	2
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	1	0	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

## 5.4 Human Rights and Discrimination

In addition to allegations of corruption and criticism on sustainability grounds, Qatar has been widely condemned for human rights abuses and discriminatory practices. Human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International (2022) and Human Rights Watch (2022), have been reporting on these abuses for years, including during the run-up to the World Cup. Workers from neighboring countries (so-called “guest workers”) were recruited to build the eight stadiums under poor working conditions, often in life-threatening work. Reports of deaths on construction sites led to repeated calls for a boycott, while FIFA and Qatar tried to downplay the real figures (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021; Pattison & McIntyre, 2021). The human rights and discrimination category includes mentions of the human rights situation in Qatar, discussing issues such as homophobia, sexism, racism, freedom of expression, and workers’ rights, and highlighting problematic, propagandistic, or discriminatory content.

Overall, this category of news coverage was the most common, as shown in Table 3.5. The main focus was on homophobia, workers’ rights, human rights violations, and women’s rights. Racism was rarely mentioned. *Ballesterer* frequently

**Table 3.5** Human Rights and Discrimination

Human Rights and Discrimination		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	20	2	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	8	3	2
	Instagram	4	1	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	12	15	2
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	30	19	5
	Twitter	1	1	1
	Instagram	1	3	1
Der Standard	Print	14	13	3
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	2	1	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

discussed the working conditions and rights of migrant workers and presented initiatives and individuals working for improvements. Through their in-depth engagement with the fans and their extended coverage of fan culture, they primarily addressed the points of criticism made by fans: “Given the corruption, oppression and injustice surrounding the tournament, it’s understandable that fans do not want to watch a minute of it” (B24 [translated by the authors]). *Kronen Zeitung* frequently mentioned allegations against Qatar, such as human rights violations, homophobia, and discrimination against women, but it rarely reported these issues in detail. *Der Standard* and *Salzburger Nachrichten* also regularly listed these allegations without going into detail, although there were individual articles devoted to each allegation. For example, *Der Standard* published an article titled, “The Fate of Sexual Minorities in Qatar: Frustration, Persecution, Beatings” (S141 [translated by the authors]), which portrayed Nasser Mohamed, the first openly gay Qatari now living in San Francisco (CA, USA), and highlighted the dangers faced by queer people in Qatar. *Salzburger Nachrichten*, *Der Standard*, and *Kronen Zeitung* all reported extensively on World Cup ambassador and former player Khalid Salman’s derogatory comments on homosexuality, which led to the ZDF (2022) interview being abruptly terminated by members of the World Cup organizing committee.

## 5.5 Protests and Political Statements

In the wake of the criticisms of the World Cup that had already been discussed, public protests at the World Cup increased (Beyer und Schulze-Marmeling, 2021; FAZ, 2022). In the end, no teams or players boycotted the World Cup, and the media largely covered the event (Köster, 2022).

However, there were a number of protests and political statements by teams, fans, and officials during the tournament. Table 3.6 shows that most of the articles about protests or political statements were published during the tournament. The ONE Love armband was discussed at length, particularly with regard to the German team. Before the World Cup, some teams, including Germany and England, designed a joint armband to stand against discrimination and for human rights and equality. “But then, FIFA landed a homerun in selling out its values by banning the wearing of the colorful ‘One Love’ armband, a simple sign against homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism. An affirmation of tolerance and human rights—to which FIFA has even committed itself in writing in its own regulations” (K135 [translated by the authors]). Being afraid of individual punishments for the captains who wore it, Germany and the other teams decided not to wear the armband, a decision that was widely discussed in the media. *Salzburger Nachrichten* even reported on the reaction to the One Love armband of the German supermarket chain *Rewe*, which decided to suspend its advertising partnership with the DFB for the time being. *Ballesterer* focused on the boycott while rarely mentioning political statements.

Then, protests in solidarity with the revolution in Iran were mentioned. For example, *Der Standard* reported on the Iranian national anthem, which the national team initially did not sing: “With their lips pressed tightly together and their arms resting on the shoulders of the players next to them, Iran’s players stood on the green pitch in Doha for the national anthem before their game against England” (SN151 [translated by the authors]). *Der Standard* also covered the protest of Mario Ferri, who stormed the Portugal–Uruguay match. He held a rainbow flag and wore a T-shirt with political messages in support of Ukraine and Iranian women. *Kronen Zeitung* mentioned worldwide actions that had taken place since the start of the World Cup against human rights violations and discrimination. Protests against homophobia or human rights abuse were often the focus of coverage. In addition to critical coverage, there was also uncritical coverage. The two codes of match coverage and FIFA as a source fall under this category.

**Table 3.6** Protests and Political Statements

Protests and Political Statements		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	20	2	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	2	1	1
	Instagram	7	2	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	6	25	1
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	16	22	2
	Twitter	1	5	0
	Instagram	1	9	1
Der Standard	Print	7	20	2
	Twitter	0	2	1
	Instagram	0	2	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

## 5.6 Match Coverage

After the start of the tournament, the focus of many articles was mainly on sporting. The match coverage category includes match analysis, reports on the condition or performance of players, match predictions and results, progress or elimination of teams, and pre- and post-match coverage.

As *Ballesterer* was published before the start of the World Cup, there was little match coverage (Table 3.7). The other three media outlets provided extensive coverage of the matches, players, teams, and coaches (Table 3.7). The four media outlets studied were also analyzed in terms of their online presence on the social networks Instagram and Twitter. These platforms were mainly used for match coverage and rarely for critical coverage.

**Table 3.7** Match Coverage

Match Coverage		Before October 23–November 20 (before kickoff)	During November 20 (after kick-off)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	4	1	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	2	3	2
	Instagram	0	4	1
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	12	103	12
	Twitter	3	136	1
	Instagram	0	2	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	62	93	25
	Twitter	1	9	0
	Instagram	3	59	23
Der Standard	Print	8	88	11
	Twitter	8	11	1
	Instagram	0	2	1
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

## 5.7 FIFA as a Source

FIFA officials or statements appeared in many articles. Even if they were mostly criticized, they were still given a platform to share their ideas and opinions.

Before and at the beginning of the World Cup, Khalid Salman and his homophobic statements were the main focus of attention. His exact words will not be quoted here to prevent giving him a platform. The newspapers under investigation did not do this and published his exact words, thus reproducing the opinion. In addition, Gianni Infantino’s statements were usually given special attention, whether they were about supposed climate neutrality, the “best World Cup ever” (S159 [translated by the authors]), or his uncommon takes on discrimination. Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter was also frequently quoted, especially on the issue of awarding the World Cup hosting rights to Qatar or the questionable developments in the host country. As shown in Table 3.8, *Kronen Zeitung* most often used FIFA as a source.

In summary, our analysis shows that not all points of criticism were equally relevant in the coverage: while the media focused more on human rights, corruption allegations, and climate change, discrimination, and media censorship were relegated to the background.

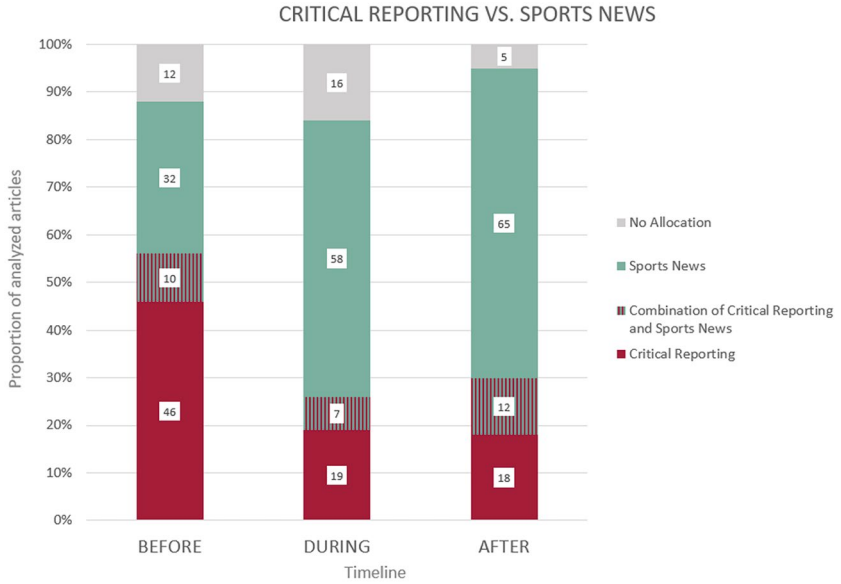
**Table 3.8** FIFA as a Source

FIFA as a Source		Before October 23–November 20 (before kick-off)	During November 20 (after kickoff)–December 18 (before the final whistle)	After December 18 (after the final whistle)–January 15
Ballesterer	Print	8	1	0
	Blog	0	0	0
	Twitter	1	1	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Salzburger Nachrichten (SN)	Print	8	5	1
	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0
Kronen Zeitung	Print	16	24	3
	Twitter	0	0	1
	Instagram	0	1	0
Der Standard	Print	11	10	2
	Twitter	1	0	0
	Instagram	3	0	0
@fifaworldcup	Twitter	0	0	0
	Instagram	0	0	0

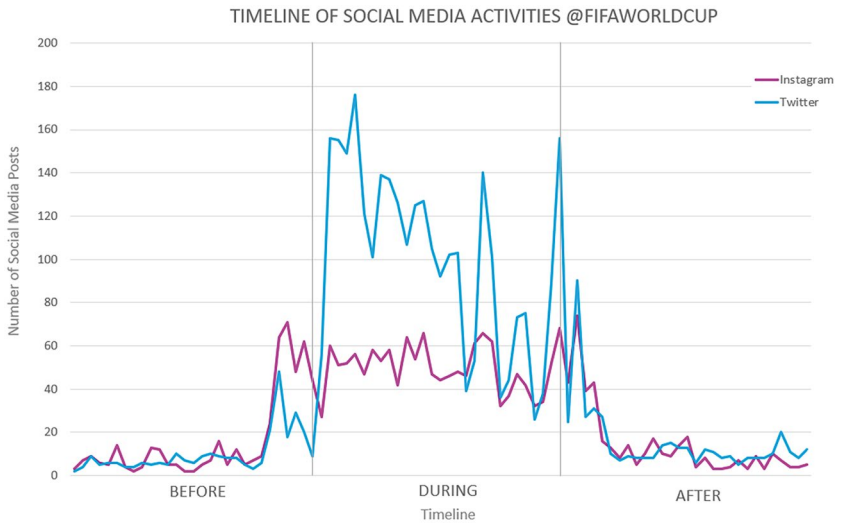
## 5.8 Switching from Critical Coverage to Sporting News as the Event Begins

To determine how the coverage changed after the start of the World Cup, sports coverage and critical coverage were compared. Although sports coverage generally dominated, critical coverage was present in all three periods examined.

In the case of *Kronen Zeitung*, sports coverage dominated all three phases. As shown in Fig. 3.2, 57% of the coverage in the first phase was about sports, 59% during the World Cup, and 69% after the World Cup. *Ballesterer* was very critical, with 96% of the articles in its magazine, and the three articles published during the World Cup were also entirely critical. No articles were published on the *Ballesterer* after the event (Fig. 3.3). *Salzburger Nachrichten* was critical in 55% of their articles before the World Cup, but this changed after the start of the tournament, with 71% and 92% focusing on sports news during and after the World Cup, respectively (Fig. 3.2). A similar picture was seen in *Der Standard*, with 66% of its articles being critical before the World Cup (Fig. 3.2). During and after the World Cup, the number of articles with sports coverage increased to 69% and 82%, respectively.



**Fig. 3.2** Critical reporting vs. sports news in journalistic articles



**Fig. 3.3** Timeline of social media posts

However, critical reporting never completely ceased in *Der Standard*, *Krone*, and *Salzburger Nachrichten*. During the tournament, critical reporting still accounted for about one-fifth to one-fourth of the reporting, at 28% (*Krone*), 17% (*Salzburger Nachrichten*), and 24% (*Der Standard*). After the tournament, critical coverage clearly receded into the background. In fact, the least coverage of the World Cup occurred during this period, and when it did occur, it tended to be about the players and reviewing the tournament.

The results indicate that our first assumption was only partially correct: Journalistic coverage changes to sports news once the event starts. Despite the dominance of sports coverage during the World Cup, the critical articles did not disappear, at least not immediately. The One Love controversy, the discussion of the involvement of the Iranian team in the revolution, stories of homophobia, and Mario Ferri are examples of critical stories that remained relevant when there were superstars chasing a ball for 90 min (or more).

## 5.9 FIFA's Exclusion of Critical Issues from Tournament Coverage

Finally, the coverage provided by FIFA's social media channels regarding the World Cup in Qatar was evaluated to assess whether FIFA presented critical perspectives. The @fifaworldcup Instagram and Twitter accounts are examined, evaluating the nature and extent of FIFA's engagement with its audience by analyzing post frequency, content types, and thematic focus.

The @fifaworldcup Instagram page was created in May 2014 for the World Cup in Brazil. The social media team creates about 3.4 posts per day, resulting in more than 13,800 posts. Over 47.2 million followers (as of May 2024) like, comment on, and share FIFA's Instagram content. To connect with other professional accounts or interested users, FIFA often uses hashtags (72% of posts) or mentions (50% of posts). This creates a particularly high outreach; on average, more than one million users have watched the videos on Instagram (so-called Reels). Leading up to the World Cup, FIFA averaged 765,000 views per video (169 videos were published); during the World Cup, the average view count increased to 1.3 million (459 Reels were posted); and following the World Cup, an average of 1.8 million people watched FIFA video content (133 posts).

The @fifaworldcup Twitter account was launched in April 2010 in preparation for the World Cup in South Africa and has over 12.8 million followers (as of May 2024). Over 30,000 posts have been made in the last 13 years, which is equal to approximately 6.7 posts per day. In the period around the World Cup, Twitter was

still limited to a maximum of 280 characters per post, but this was often circumvented by including photos and videos or embedding links. Before the World Cup, 53% of posts contained media. During the tournament, match results were often only commented on with emoticons, and media use was reduced to 40%, but after the final, the use of media returned to 52%. Figure 3.3 shows the timeline of the social media activity of @fifaworldcup on Instagram and Twitter.

The social media platforms were almost exclusively (93% of the total number of posts) used to talk about players, teams, results, or other football news. On both platforms, FIFA legitimized its expertise and highlighted the long tradition of major football events and the fan cult around them, especially before and after the event. For Twitter, about 10% of posts before and after the World Cup were about fan activities and FIFA's "favorite memories" of past games. For Instagram, 8% of content revolved around that topic. Additionally, Twitter was used for the promotion of "exclusive" information and audiovisual entertainment content produced by FIFA, which was available on the FIFA+ blog. Around 10% of the posts featured a link to this website. As Instagram does not allow the embedding of links in individual posts, the link was included in the profile description. This information was mentioned in about 2% of the posts. No critical coverage of the World Cup was found in any of FIFA's social media posts. FIFA also made no reference to the protests that occurred inside the stadium before, during, or after the matches. Therefore, our second assumption was correct.

## 6 Conclusion

After the final whistle, most media claimed that "Argentina's win over France was the greatest World Cup final ever" (Morse, 2022). The Austrian media in our sample saw it the same way, but not without including criticism: "An all but uncontroversial final round in Qatar produced an uncontroversial new football world champion in Argentina on Sunday" (APA, 2022 [translated by the authors]). FIFA president Gianni Infantino might have gotten the best World Cup final, but not necessarily "the best World Cup ever" as he had hoped for (Peach, 2022). Certainly, the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will go down in history as the most criticized to date.

Our study examined the coverage of the Qatar World Cup 2022 by Austrian newspapers—*Ballesterer*, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, *Kronen Zeitung*, and *Der Standard*—before, during, and after the tournament. Content analysis was conducted to compare their coverage with FIFA's own content during the World Cup. Newspaper articles were analyzed across seven categories: media censorship, allegations of corruption and fraud by FIFA and Qatar, climate, human rights and

discrimination, protests and political statements, FIFA as a source, and match coverage. Additionally, examination of the @fifaworldcup Instagram and Twitter accounts focused on post frequency, content types, and thematic focus, mirroring the seven categories mentioned above. The aim was to assess the extent to which Austrian media reported (critically) on the World Cup, analyze potential shifts from discussing controversial issues to sports news once the tournament started, and explore whether FIFA addressed critical and controversial topics surrounding the event on their Instagram and Twitter content.

Our study reveals a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of the Qatar World Cup, including both positive and negative narratives. In conclusion, we have demonstrated that in Austria, the journalistic media fulfilled their role as ‘detached observers’ (Lohmann & Seethaler, 2016, p. 2) and provided critical coverage. Prior to the tournament, there was significant attention directed towards pressing issues such as climate conditions, sustainability, human rights violations, and corruption allegations associated with Qatar’s bid. Similar critiques were observed prior to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, and the 2018 World Cup in Russia (Alekseyeva, 2014; Arnold, 2021; Beck, 2017; Hutchings et al., 2015; Ihle et al., 2017; Müller, 2015; Schallhorn, 2017).

According to Beck (2017), before major events, societally relevant topics are particularly important, but once it starts, they tend to recede into the background. Contrary to initial expectations, critical discourse persisted beyond the tournament’s commencement, evident in discussions surrounding contentious topics such as the ONE Love armband, solidarity expressions with Iran, and protests against homophobia and human rights abuses in Qatar. Despite a shift towards sports reporting as the tournament began, critical discourse remained present across all phases examined. While sports coverage predominated, varying degrees of critical reporting persisted. Critical reporting never entirely ceased, with instances of it comprising a significant portion of coverage during the tournament across all newspapers, indicating a nuanced relationship between critical and sports coverage. Key issues examined included alleged corruption in the run-up to the event, labour conditions of construction workers, and the tournament’s environmental impact. This analysis challenges claims that sports journalism is often hesitant or unprepared to address challenging responsibilities as part of the ‘fourth estate’ (Rowe, 2016).

On-ground reportage and investigation of issues such as discrimination against women and members of the LGBTQ+ community in Qatar, as well as media censorship, received limited attention. This clearly highlights the difficult working conditions for investigative reporting in Qatar and the obvious violations of press freedom there. Nevertheless, the media acted responsibly within the limits of their

possibilities and resources, recognizing that a boycott would have left the stage entirely to FIFA, which would have been more than happy to take it. The rise of In-House-“Newsrooms” and Social Media enables organizations like FIFA to bypass (critical) journalism, exerting control over the “flow and shape of information” (English, 2021; Nölleke & Birkner, 2019).

The extensive media coverage surrounding mega events in world sports, as evidenced by the literature review, has undergone significant transformation with the advent of the “new wave of mediatization” (Frandsen, 2016). Furthermore, organizers like FIFA have seized the opportunity to curate their own coverage through social media platforms. Our analysis of FIFA’s social media channels during the Qatar World Cup revealed a deliberate exclusion of critical perspectives, despite the platform’s substantial reach to an audience of millions. The platforms primarily showcased football-related content, with minimal mention of sociopolitical issues or critical discourse.

Notably, our study does not delve into media effects research, limiting our ability to discern the impact of FIFA’s communication approach on its vast audience, comprising billions of tournament viewers and millions of Instagram and Twitter followers. Additionally, the reliance on a small sample of four media outlets in Austria underscores the limitations of our findings. The failure to qualify for the World Cup may have made it easier for the Austrian media to act as ‘detached observers’ (Lohmann & Seethaler, 2016, p. 2), as the journalists did not have to act as fans of their own national team. Nonetheless, our analysis confirms the prevailing narrative regarding FIFA’s social media coverage, which predominantly prioritizes football-related content over critical discourse or sociopolitical issues.

In the future, it would be interesting to analyse critical tournaments and their reporting in countries whose national teams are participating. In this case, other patterns could be identified, and the critical reporting could move even more into the background than is the case in Austria during the World Cup in Qatar 2022. This would further investigate Beck’s (2017) observation of high personal involvement and fan culture of sports journalists. Furthermore, every World Cup represents an exceptional situation that is difficult to compare with other events. In order to be able to draw meaningful conclusions about the behaviour of sports journalists and FIFA with regard to (critical) reporting on major events, future events should also be observed. Looking at future events and their host countries’ environmental and social conscience concerning their upcoming role in the global football arena, there are many controversial World Cups to come (Eurosport, 2024; MacInnes, 2024; Sky Sport, 2023).

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# The World Cup in Qatar—Watch or Boycott? Online Survey on the Spectator Behavior of the German Population Regarding the Venue of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

Romy Schwaiger

## 1 Research Idea

In March 2022, FIFA President Gianni Infantino announced the 2022 FIFA World Cup as “[...] the best World Cup in history, the greatest show on earth [...]” (kicker, 2022). However, the awarding of the 2022 World Cup by the FIFA Executive Committee in 2010 to the desert state of Qatar led to a controversial debate about ethics and morals in world football right from the start. In particular, the working and living conditions of foreign guest workers in Qatar were sometimes inhumane (cf. Brüggemann, 2022, p. 12). As early as February 2021, the British daily newspaper “Guardian” reported that 6500 migrant workers had died in the course of construction work since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar (cf. Pattison & McIntyre, 2021). As part of the media coverage in the run-up to the World Cup, more and more calls were therefore made to raise awareness of the abuses in Qatar (cf. Golüke & Grantner, 2022). Due to the conditions and human rights violations in Qatar, business ethicists such as Thomas Beschorner from the University of St. Gallen/Switzerland (cf. Rawohl, 2022), as well as professional German clubs such as Fortuna Düsseldorf and Karlsruher SC, called for a boycott of the tournament in

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the run-up to the event (cf. #boycottqatar2022, 2022). There were also discussions in the media about boycotting the TV broadcasts of the matches (cf. ZDF, 2022). These debates about a possible boycott were taken as an opportunity to examine the viewing behavior of the German population with regard to the venue of the 2022 World Cup as part of a study.

Based on the preliminary considerations, the following research questions have therefore emerged, which are to be answered on the basis of the study:

1. What is the opinion of the German population on the awarding of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar?
2. What is the opinion of the German population on a possible boycott of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar?
3. What are the reasons for a possible boycott?
4. What form will the boycott of the World Cup in Qatar take?

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## 2 State of Research

Most studies on mega sporting events focus on the tournaments themselves. For example, Branimir, Bojan and Milivoi (2023, p. 1ff.) investigated how the patterns of attacking actions of the goals scored developed during 14 Football World Cups from 1966 to 2018. The study analyzed 1881 goals scored in a total of 732 matches. Furthermore, a large number of publications analyzed the developments of a major sporting event in the run-up to the event. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2014, p. 703ff.) looked at the phenomena of “soft disempowerment”, which is the counterpart to “soft power”, and “glocal consciousness”, a neologism combining globalization and local awareness. To this end, they explored the role of global sport within Qatar’s international strategy with regard to their successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Haghirian and Robles-Gil (2021, p. 171ff.) looked at the experiences of previous hosts of major sporting events such as the Olympic Games or a FIFA World Cup and examined how countries can be both empowered and disempowered through their pursuit of soft power. A selective literature review was used to compile the soft power experiences of six countries that have hosted either the Olympic Games or a World Cup.

In another study, Matzarakis and Fröhlich (2015, p. 481ff.) looked at the impact of the weather on a sporting event. They focused on the time and location of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and carried out a biometeorological analysis to determine the time of year that is best suited in terms of thermal comfort for visitors to the

tournament. Based on the results, the research team ultimately concluded that this type of event may not be suitable for visitors if it takes place in months with extreme climatic conditions. Therefore, using Qatar as an example, the months of November to February were recommended as the most suitable.

Rookwood (2019, p. 26ff.) published a study on a similar aspect, namely the perception of Qatar's suitability to host a successful sporting event. He took a look at the organizational challenges that Qatar had to face in the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Under the premises of "nation branding" and "soft power", various demographic groups were interviewed between 2010 and 2018, including football journalists, volunteers and fans, with a total of 30 guided interviews being conducted. Various concerns and considerations regarding hosting the tournament in the Middle East were expressed and organizational challenges were discussed.

Several publications have linked the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar to the image of travel destinations. For example, Andersson, Bengtsson and Svensson (2021, p. 1ff.) used several mega sporting events to investigate whether they influence the image of destinations and which factors play a role in visitors' perceptions and intentions to attend such an event in certain destinations. To this end, 329 Swedish football fans were asked about their motivation to travel to the event and the corresponding location using guided interviews. A key finding was that there are differences in the perception of a destination's image after fans have visited a mega sporting event. Positive perceptions were mainly related to whether the destination managed to achieve important factors. As part of a study, Lepp and Gibson (2011, p. 211ff.) analyzed the role that media coverage of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa played in changing the image associated with the country among a group of 79 students from the USA. The research team found that South Africa's strategy of improving its image through sport appeared to work for the participants. They showed that media coverage of major sporting events can be very influential and should be managed to achieve the desired results.

Media coverage of a mega sporting event has often been the subject of research interest in national and international studies. For example, Schallhorn (2017, p. 140ff.) looked at the cultivation effects of media coverage of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil from the perspective of the cultivation approach. She carried out a content analysis of wide-ranging media (print, online, TV) and a two-wave panel survey of 431 participants. She found that negatively connoted topics such as crime or poverty were reported on comparatively rarely. In addition, between the two waves of the survey, there were significant changes in perceptions of Brazil for six topics, which in five cases corresponded with the trend in reporting. Using a panel survey of 76 participants with three rounds of data collection, Schallhorn (2019, p. 509ff.) also investigated how the perception of television viewers of the

host country Brazil changed before and after the 2014 FIFA World Cup and after the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil. She found that the perception of topics related to Brazil, such as the risk of crime, the standard of living or the economic situation, has become more negative over time. In addition, respondents tended to associate negative images with Brazil after the respective sporting events.

In her study, Christoffer (2021, p. 28ff.) addressed how the international image of a host city can be strengthened through positive media coverage of a major sporting event and how national identity and national pride can be promoted in one's own country ("nation building"). To this end, she analyzed the content of German and Brazilian press coverage of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and compared them with each other. She analyzed 3,538 articles from two German and three Brazilian newspapers. She found that in both countries, critical perspectives were taken more often than positive ones. The focus was not only on sporting events, but also on organizational issues and protests against the hosting of the World Cup. In her conclusion, she assumes that Brazil's image has not improved as a result of the World Cup coverage and that the tournament has therefore not led to successful "nation building" and "nation branding".

The effects following a major sporting event have also been scientifically investigated in isolated cases. The focus has mainly been on the Olympic Games, which is why these studies are not presented in detail (cf. Müller, 2014; Tomlinson, 2016; Cohen & Watt, 2017; Talbot, 2019).

A (possible) boycott of Football World Cups or other major sporting events has only occasionally been the focus of academic interest. In his essay, Kobiericki (2015, p. 93ff.) addressed the boycott of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, which is considered one of the most spectacular boycotts carried out by communist countries. It was seen as a reaction to a similar action by Western countries against the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. The author shed particular light on the preparations and background to the boycott as well as the Soviet Union's actual objectives. Reiche (2018, p. 283ff.) also noted in his article that sport and politics cannot be separated from each other at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. However, many Western heads of state deliberately boycotted the World Cup. The researcher also draws a comparison between Russia and Qatar as the venue for the 2022 World Cup, noting that the motives of the two countries for hosting such a sporting event are very different. While Russia focused in particular on domestic political reasons, Qatar used sport as a foreign policy instrument that contributes to national security and enables the country to gain soft power. Last but not least, Samuel-Azran, Hayat and Galily (2022, p. 1159ff.) examined the profiles of users of the hashtag #boycott-qatar2022. This hashtag was used to express a global initiative calling for a boycott of the 2022 FIFA World Cup due to Qatar's alleged violation of human rights.

A total of 111,172 posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in which the hashtag was used were analyzed. The research team was able to show that 82% of users of the hashtag came from North America and Western Europe and 88% of the hashtags were used on Twitter. In addition, the political attitude of the users was predominantly liberal compared to other users.

As the boycott of major sporting events has rarely been at the center of academic discourse to date, this article aims to close a research gap in this regard. The focus of this study lays on spectator behavior and the motives behind a possible boycott of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

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### **3 Theoretical Localization**

As already described in the state of research, the study can be categorized in the area of image research, which specifically includes research on the image of travel destinations (cf. Andersson et al., 2021, p. 1). These so-called “geographical imaginations” of a destination often consist of mental images of consumers who have specific key images of the destinations in their heads. These can include, for example, landscapes, buildings or typical activities, behaviors or practices. This often creates stereotypes and clichés in people’s minds (cf. Eisenstein & Scherhag, 2022, p. 15), even if they have not yet visited the destination themselves. As a result, positive or negative perceptions and values are assigned to certain places and certain images are created (cf. Camilleri, 2019, p. 30). The image of a destination therefore consists of the mental representation of knowledge, beliefs, ideas, expectations, feelings and global impressions that individuals have of a destination (cf. Da Silva et al., 2018, p. 95). In addition, destinations have faced significantly more competition in recent decades due to the global nature of tourist destinations (cf. Eisenstein, 2022, p. 68), which is why a positive image is an important economic factor. Both small and, of course, especially large sporting events have therefore become a kind of commodity that is increasingly in demand for the marketing of destinations and their tourism. The task of these destinations is to create a strong brand in a competitive tourism market. In addition, a positive brand image is essential, which is influenced by the creation of a unique identity that sets the destination apart from the competition (cf. Morgan et al., 2021, p. 2). This brand image is determined on the one hand by cognitive evaluations, which include beliefs and knowledge, and on the other hand by affective evaluations such as feelings (cf. Qu et al., 2011, p. 467).

Major sporting events give a country the opportunity to redefine its image or to reshape the perception of visitors from other countries. “Major sport events have

become a key component of destination branding” (Hemmonsby & Tichaawa, 2018, p. 216). In addition to “destination branding”, the “nation branding” approach can also be used in connection with this research work. Fan (2010, p. 101) defines “nation branding” as “[...] process by which a nation’s images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience”. Nation branding is therefore about the entire image of a country, which is presented on an international stage in the course of a mega sporting event, consisting of political, economic and cultural dimensions (cf. Fan, 2010, p. 98). Emerging countries in particular see the promotion and hosting of such an event as a quick way to gain global recognition and improve their reputation (cf. Heslop et al., 2013, p. 13). In addition, nation branding objectives can also be specifically linked to global diplomacy (cf. Nauright, 2013, p. 23).

A major sporting event can therefore be used to promote a positive image or improve a negative image (cf. Knott et al., 2017, p. 904). This is because spectators from all over the world learn background information about the people and their everyday lives in the host country during a major sporting event. Media coverage in the run-up to and during such events contributes to this in particular (cf. Schallhorn, 2020, p. 50). A country’s tourism industry can benefit from a positive image, which has a positive impact on local restaurants, retailers and transport companies. A host country can also present itself as attractively as possible and achieve both economic and image-enhancing benefits after successfully hosting the mega sporting event (cf. Schallhorn, 2020, p. 51).

The “soft power” approach, described by Dubinsky (2019, p. 156) as the “[...] ability to shape preferences of others and getting them to do what you want through attraction without the use of payments or of military force”, can serve this purpose. The three most important resources of soft power are culture, political values and foreign policy (cf. Dubinsky, 2019, p. 156). For example, a nation can acquire soft power through the attractiveness of its cultural components, its political ethos and the legitimacy and authority of its foreign policy (cf. Rookwood, 2019, p. 29). In particular, host nations hope that hosting a sporting mega-event such as the FIFA World Cup will have a positive impact and strengthen their position on the global stage (cf. Armstrong et al., 2021, p. 97; Haghirian & Robles-Gil, 2021, p. 174f.). Therefore, sport mega-events are seen as important potential mechanisms for a host country to gain soft power. As part of a soft power agenda, host nations ideally attract investors, tourists and attention (cf. Næss, 2023, p. 1). The events can serve as a platform to engage with and influence foreign target groups (cf. Rookwood, 2019, p. 32).

However, hosting a major sporting event can also have a negative impact on the host country, which is in the global spotlight before and during the event. This is also referred to as “soft disempowerment”. For example, diplomatic crises can arise that have a negative impact on a nation’s branding (cf. Rookwood, 2019, p. 32). The example of Qatar as the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup was also used to critically examine many negative developments and deceptions of the desert state, with this criticism focusing primarily on three areas (cf. Samuel-Azran et al., 2022, p. 1181). The first area related to Qatar’s (in)suitability to host major sporting events due to the country’s summer climate. Due to temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius in the hottest months, Qatar was considered a high-risk destination for fans and athletes. The second section deals with the allegations of bribery and corruption that have arisen, particularly in connection with Qatar’s bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The third and final section deals with the criticism of international organizations and the media with regard to the restrictions on civil and political rights. In particular, the treatment of migrant workers in the construction sector came under worldwide scrutiny (cf. Samuel-Azran et al., 2022, p. 1181).

Based on these theoretical considerations, the study therefore aimed to investigate the extent to which Qatar’s negative image as the host of the 2022 World Cup had an influence on a possible boycott of the major event by the German population.

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## 4 Study Design

An online survey was used as a method to best research the spectator behavior of the German population during the 2022 World Cup. Since the further development of the internet, the online survey has become an important variant (cf. Brosius et al., 2016, p. 112). As it is network-based and takes place on the internet, it can also be referred to as an internet-based survey (cf. Schnell et al., 2018, p. 343). The major advantage is that the questionnaire can be designed to be interactive and multimedia-based. For example, the link to the questionnaire can be sent by email, via social media or messenger apps. Survey software based on HTML1 software is normally used to host the questionnaire. These include providers such as Unipark, which was used in the course of this study. The online survey tool belongs to the company Tivian, which is a leading provider in the field of employee experience, customer experience and market research (cf. Tivian, n.d.).

The target group selected was people interested in football who are particularly invested in major sporting events such as the World Cup and also watch them on television. The study was designed in the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in

Qatar and entered the field phase before the semi-finals began. Between December 12 and 26, 2022, 1.386 people from all over Germany took part in the online survey.

The advantage of survey software, like Unipark, is that the results can be exported directly as a numerical table via the online questionnaire tool. This table can then be imported into a statistics program for further analysis. At the end of the study period, the data set was imported into the IBM SPSS 28 statistics program and then cleansed. “Before analyzing the data, it is particularly important to carry out a good and conscientious data cleansing” (Taddicken & Batinic, 2014, p. 172). Once the data cleansing was complete, the response items for the individual questions were assigned codes with labels, and numbers were entered for the missing values. This served to have SPSS analyze descriptive frequencies in the first step, which formed the basis for creating the charts and tables in the results section. The most important facts were then also checked for possible significance. If significance was found, the effect size was calculated in the next step in order to be able to make valid statements about the results.

Even if the sample does not claim to be representative due to an arbitrary selection, the study does offer interesting insights into spectator behavior with regard to a possible boycott of a major sporting event.

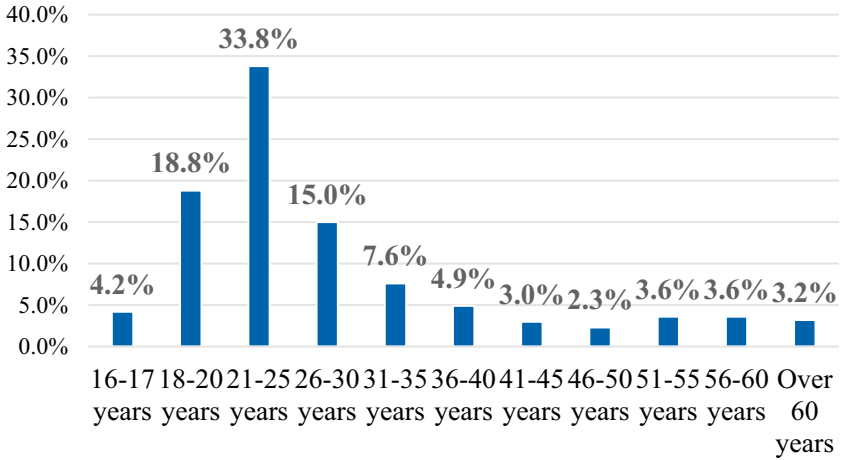
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## 5 Results

Of the 1.386 participants, 63.0% stated that they were female, while 36.0% were male and 1.0% were diverse. It is particularly striking that almost two thirds of the participants were women, which is rather unusual when it comes to surveys on football. This distribution can be explained by the distribution of the link to the online survey. As a male social media influencer with a five-digit number of followers shared the link to the online survey via his story function on the social media platform Instagram, female subscribers in particular were encouraged to take part in the online survey.

With regard to the age distribution of the participants, it is noticeable that the age range of 21- to 25-year-olds accounts for the largest proportion at 33.8%, followed by 18- to 20-year-olds (18.8%) and 26- to 30-year-olds (15.0%). Overall, four out of five respondents are aged between 16 and 35 (79.4%) (see Fig. 4.1). This disproportionate distribution of the younger age groups can also be explained by the target group of the online survey.

The aim of the study was to acquire participants from all German federal states, which was successfully achieved. However, there are clear conurbations with the



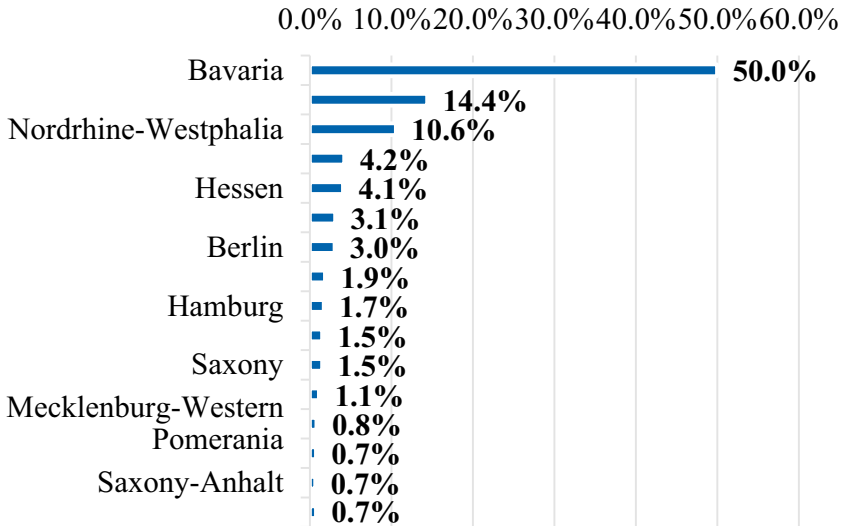
**Fig. 4.1** Age distribution of participants;  $n = 1.386$ . (Source: own illustration)

federal states of Bavaria (50.0%), Baden-Württemberg (14.4%) and North Rhine-Westphalia (10.6%). As the online survey was conducted in Bavaria, it is easy to explain why half of all respondents came from this state. All other federal states were represented by between 0.7 and 4.2% of participants (see Fig. 4.2).

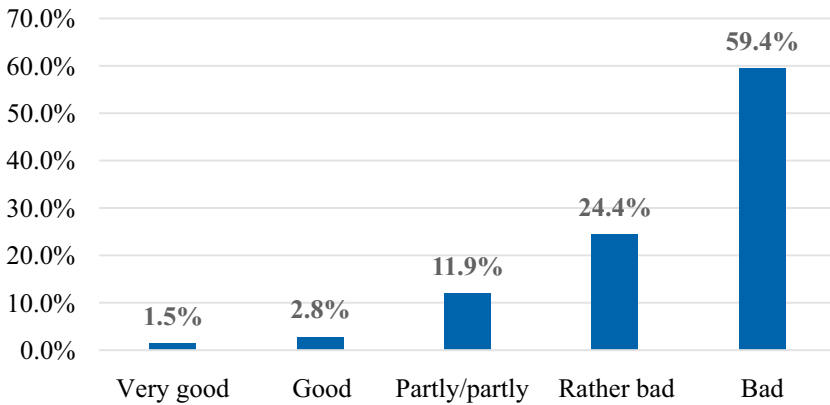
At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to indicate what they generally thought of the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar. It is striking that 83.8% said “rather bad” and “bad”, while only 4.3% of respondents considered the award to be “very good” or “good” (see Fig. 4.3). These figures clearly show that the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar is viewed critically by the German public. The media discourse surrounding the staging of the World Cup in the desert state of Qatar, which has been going on since FIFA awarded the tournament in 2010, has certainly contributed to the poor image of the venue.

With regard to the response behavior of both genders, it can be seen that female participants tend to rate the award slightly worse than male participants (see Table 4.1). However, both female (84.0%) and male respondents (83.9%) gave almost identical ratings of “rather bad” and “bad”. It is therefore not surprising that there is no significant difference between the two genders.

The participants who stated “rather bad” or “bad” in the previous question ( $n = 1.250$ ) were asked in a filter question about the reason for their assessment, with multiple answers possible. 87.0% cited the human rights situation in Qatar as the main reason for their poor rating, followed by the poor working conditions for



**Fig. 4.2** Participants by German federal state; n = 1.386. (Source: own illustration)

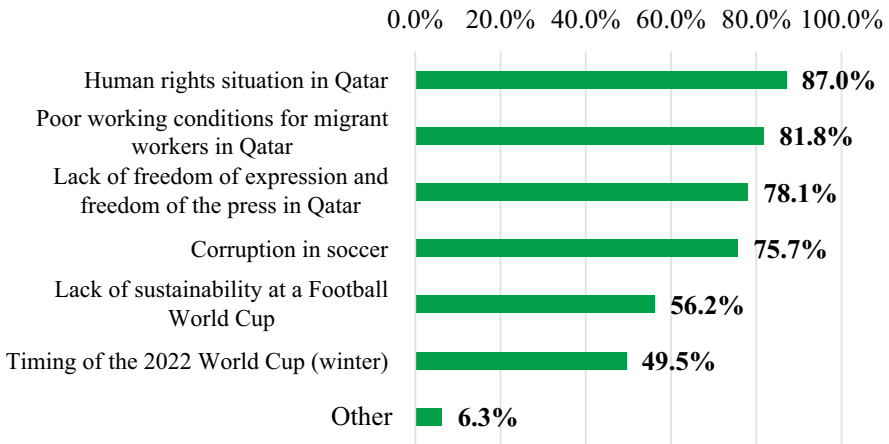


**Fig. 4.3** Question: "What do you think of the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar?"; n = 1.306. (Source: own illustration)

**Table 4.1** Response behavior of the different genders with regard to the question: “What do you think of the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar?”; n = 1.306,

	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Very good	1.1	1.7
Good	2.7	2.9
Partly/partly	12.2	11.5
Rather bad	22.4	28.0
Bad	61.6	55.9

Source: Own illustration



**Fig. 4.4** Question: “Why do you rate the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar in this way?”, multiple answers possible; n = 1.250. (Source: own illustration)

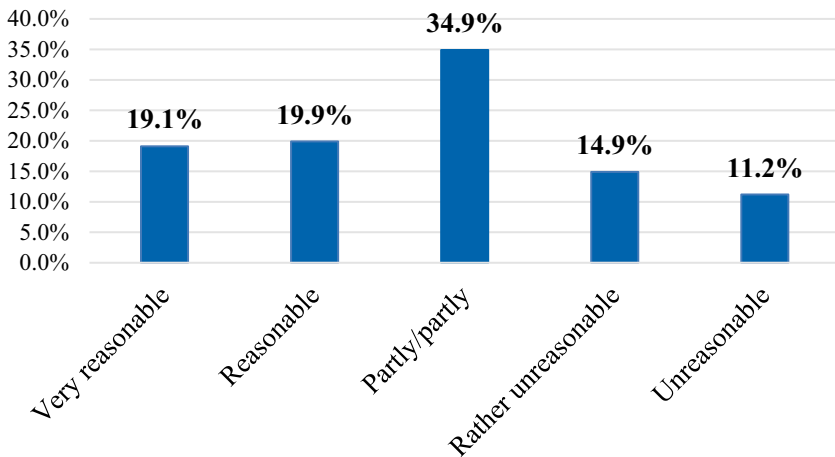
migrant workers in Qatar (81.8%), the lack of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Qatar (78.1%) and general corruption in football (75.7%) (see Fig. 4.4). The two response items lack of sustainability at a Football World Cup (56.2%) and the timing of the 2022 World Cup in winter (49.5%) received slightly lower scores. In addition, 6.3% of participants stated “other”. In the 79 answers given in the open text field, the reasons given included the use of sport exclusively for political purposes, the restrictions on fans, the lack of women’s rights in Qatar, the lack of football culture and tradition, the climate concept and the commercialization of football.

In the next step, respondents were asked to state what they think of a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar. 39.0% of respondents said that a boycott would be “very

reasonable” or “reasonable”. 34.9% of respondents were rather undecided, while just over a quarter (26.1%) considered a boycott to be “rather unreasonable” or “unreasonable” (see Fig. 4.5).

It can be seen that female participants consider a boycott of the World Cup to be much more reasonable than male participants. For example, 44.1% of female respondents answered “very reasonable” and “reasonable”, while this was the case for 30.7% of male respondents. In contrast, 38.8% of male respondents considered a boycott to be “rather unreasonable” and “unreasonable”, while only 18.2% of female respondents selected these two response items (see Table 4.2). Although the results for the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar were still balanced in terms of the two genders, there are clearer differences here. It can be concluded from this that, although male participants consider the awarding of the World Cup to be “rather unreasonable” and “unreasonable”, they are less likely to consider boycotting the World Cup than female participants. There is a significant difference between the two genders with a weak effect ( $r = 0.235$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The survey participants were then asked whether they were consciously boycotting the World Cup in Qatar. This showed that only just under a third (32.4%) were doing so, while the majority (56.5%) were not boycotting (see Fig. 4.6). While 39.0% of respondents still considered a boycott to be “very reasonable” and “reasonable”, only 32.4% of them are actually boycotting the World Cup consciously.



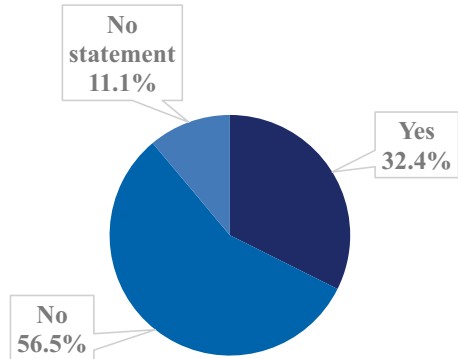
**Fig. 4.5** Question: “What do you think of a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar?”;  $n = 1.255$ . (Source: own illustration)

**Table 4.2** Response behavior of the different genders with regard to the question: “What do you think of a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar?”; n = 1.306

	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Very reasonable	22.5	13.3
Reasonable	21.6	17.4
Partly/partly	37.7	30.5
Rather unreasonable	11.2	20.9
Unreasonable	7.0	17.9

Source: Own illustration

**Fig. 4.6** Question: “Are you boycotting the World Cup in Qatar?”; n = 1.255. (Source: own illustration)



Here too, female respondents are much more consistent when it comes to deliberately boycotting the World Cup. At 36.8%, female participants boycott the World Cup significantly more often than male participants (24.9%) (see Table 4.3). Over two thirds of male respondents (68.0%) even stated that they were not consciously boycotting the World Cup. This again shows clear differences in the response behavior of the different genders.

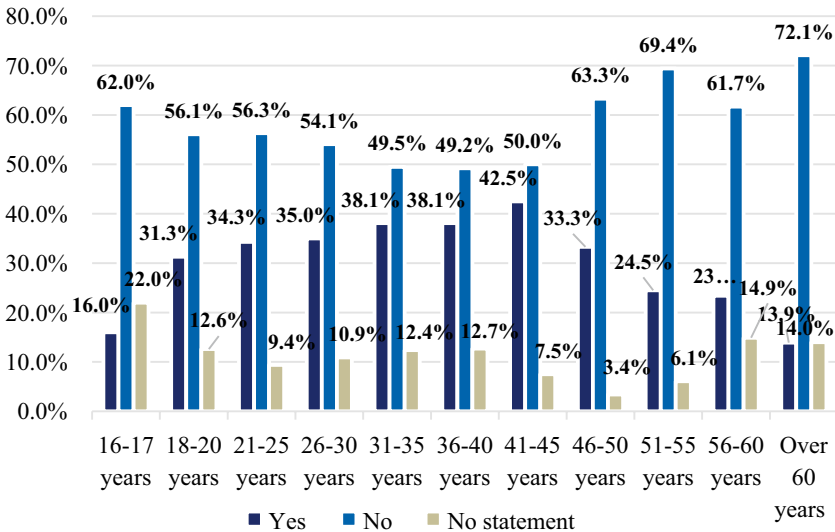
There are also clear differences in response behavior between the different age groups of participants. For example, both the youngest respondents aged 16–17 and the older age groups aged 46 and over are significantly more likely to reject a boycott of the World Cup than respondents aged between 18 and 45 (see Fig. 4.7). Conversely, participants aged between 18 and 45 in particular stated that they would consciously boycott the World Cup in Qatar. At 42.5%, the figure is highest among 41- to 45-year-olds.

Of the 32.4% of respondents (n = 406) who stated that they were deliberately boycotting the World Cup, the majority (61.3%) did not watch any matches on television or live stream and did not follow the World Cup via other media. One in

**Table 4.3** Response behavior of the different genders to the question: “Are you boycotting the World Cup in Qatar?”; n = 1.255

	Female respondents (%)	Male respondents (%)
Yes	36.8	24.9
No	49.5	68.0
No statement	13.7	7.1

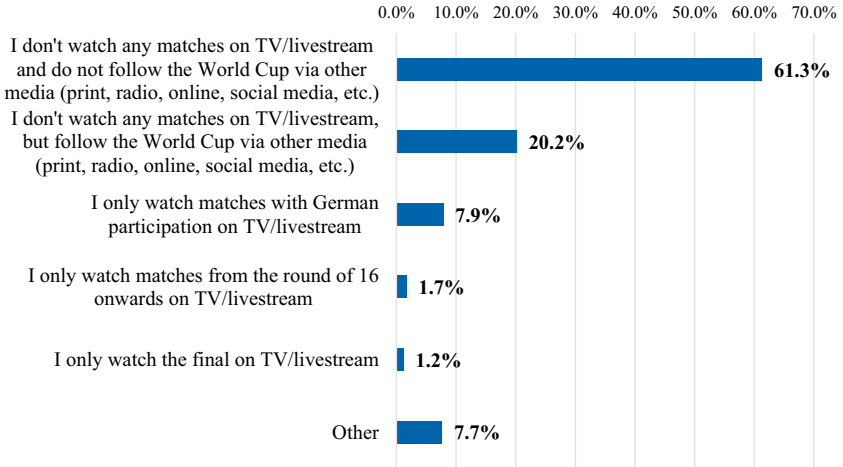
Source: Own illustration



**Fig. 4.7** Response behavior of the different age groups to the question: “Are you boycotting the World Cup in Qatar?”; n = 1.255. (Source: own illustration)

five (20.2%) did not watch any matches on television or livestream, but consumed them via other channels (see Fig. 4.8).

7.9% said that they only watch matches with German participation on TV/ livestream. All other options were significantly lower. 7.7% also stated “other”. This included answers such as “When I listen to the news on the radio, I listen to the current World Cup coverage out of necessity”, “I only watched one match”, “I watch a lot of documentaries about Qatar”, “On the side through family members or conversations” or “Only clips on social media”.



**Fig. 4.8** Question: “In what way are you boycotting the World Cup in Qatar?”; n = 406. (Source: own illustration)

## 6 Conclusion and Outlook

The desert state of Qatar was the first Arab nation to host a Football World Cup. The tournament was held in winter for the first time in its 92-year history due to the climatic conditions in Qatar. In addition, no World Cup has ever been so controversial. The political situation in particular made for a series of negative headlines in the international media before and during the World Cup. In the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, football fans staged a series of protests in the stadiums and called for an active boycott of the tournament. The “Boycott Qatar 2022” initiative asked people to refrain from watching TV broadcasts and buying merchandise related to the World Cup. These developments were taken as an opportunity to conduct a study that examined the viewing behavior of the German population and a possible boycott of the 2022 World Cup.

Based on the available results, it can be stated that more than one in five (83.8%) considered the awarding of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar to be “rather bad” or “bad”. However, there was no significant difference between male and female respondents. In principle, the human rights situation, the poor working conditions for migrant workers, the lack of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Qatar and corruption in football in general were criticized and thus also described

as motives for a possible boycott. Almost 40% of respondents also considered a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar to be “very reasonable” or “reasonable”. Female participants find a boycott more reasonable than male participants. There is also a significant difference with a weak effect size between female and male respondents. However, only around a third (32.4%) of participants consciously boycotted the World Cup in Qatar. Female respondents boycotted the World Cup in Qatar more often than male respondents. There was also a significant difference with a weak effect size between the genders. Participants between the ages of 18 and 45 were more likely to boycott the World Cup, while people over 50 were less likely to do so. The figures show that although large sections of the German population welcomed a boycott of the World Cup, they often did not put it into practice themselves.

Whether a boycott of a major sporting event is often expedient due to the political situation in the host nation will certainly continue to be discussed. Human rights organizations actually advise against a hard boycott. Historically, boycotts have never effectively prevented major sporting events from being held, but have tended to have a symbolic character. Rather, events such as the Olympic Games or Football World Cups should be used even more to denounce human rights violations, for example, and put them on the global public agenda. Further scientific research on major sporting events can also contribute to this, particularly with regard to their influence on destination branding, nation branding and the soft power of a venue or host nation.

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# Intended and Actual Boycott of a Sporting Event Perceived as Unsustainable: The Media Behavior of Football Enthusiasts in Switzerland During the 2022 World Cup in Qatar

Juliette Passamani and Daniel Beck

## 1 Introduction

For many years, live broadcasts from the FIFA World Cup with the participation of the Swiss national team have been among the most popular contents on television in Switzerland (SRF, 2024), and like in all previous tournaments since 2006, the Swiss team qualified for the World Cup in Qatar in 2022. The question of whether responsible football fans should boycott the event, i.e. deliberately not watch live broadcasts of the matches, was thus also discussed in Switzerland. Public radio and television explored the question of whether fans should “party or switch off” (Bleisch & Eilenberger, 2022), and ethics experts explained in national and regional media the reasons for or against a boycott (e.g., Haenni, 2022; Lustenberger, 2022). In any case, FIFA’s role as the organizer of the World Cup in Qatar is a topic with high news value for Swiss media, because the organization has its headquarters in Switzerland and its president at the time of the event, Gianni Infantino, is Swiss.

Supporters of the boycott calls were convinced that fans boycotting the World Cup could send a signal in support of human rights and thus increase the pressure

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on the organizers (Lustenberger, 2022). The counterarguments were that the protests would come too late, that a boycott by football fans would not help anyone and would only put the fans in a moral dilemma instead of those responsible for the event (Haenni, 2022; Bleisch & Eilenberger, 2022). Critical voices addressed the specific situation in Switzerland, pointing out that a constitutional democracy should closely monitor whether domestic organizations observe the law, and that FIFA had been treated rather uncritically in this respect in the past. If the authorities took a closer look and intervened faster in the event of irregularities, this would help more to solve problems than some football fans deciding not to switch on the television (Bärtschi, 2022).

Compared to the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, in which the Swiss national team reached the round of 16 like in Qatar, the TV ratings for the matches in German-speaking Switzerland fell only slightly. On the other hand, live streams and the mobile app provided by SRF, the public broadcaster, were used more frequently than 4 years before (SRG Deutschschweiz, 2022). This contrasts with Germany, where significantly lower viewer numbers were recorded for live TV broadcasts during the 2022 World Cup than in 2018 (Nieland, 2023, p. 25). Apparently, the calls for a boycott in Switzerland were thus only implemented to a limited extent. The aim of this study is to find out more about the media use of football fans in Switzerland during the World Cup in Qatar: Who of them considered boycotting, and if so, why? What were the reasons why an intended boycott was, or was not, carried out? And how is the effectiveness of boycotts and the role of politics in sport assessed in general? To this end, a standardized online survey, aimed at any person living in Switzerland and being interested in football, was conducted in February and March 2023, shortly after the event.

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## 2 Conceptual Foundation and State of Research

According to Dayan and Katz (1992), the FIFA World Cup and other major sporting events such as the Olympic Games can be seen as media events: They disrupt the routine of both media providers and audiences, monopolize coverage across all media, and are characterized by live coverage; they are pre-planned events realized and accounted for by external actors rather than the media themselves, include ceremonies built on reverence, celebrate reconciliation, and attract large, often global audiences (Hepp & Krotz, 2008, p. 265). With the rise of internet, social media, and online streaming services, media events have evolved from live, ceremonial broadcasts mainly watched on television to more complex and interactive multi-platform phenomena that engage audiences across various media formats

(Sumiala, 2024). The high level of public attention makes major sporting events economically and politically relevant: they can be a factor for tourism and other sectors of the economy, and the host countries hope for a positive image transfer from the successful staging of such events, as do politicians who appear in the media when attending them (Rose & Spiegel, 2008; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Mittag & Nieland, 2011). Major sporting events are thus typically organized by combinations of national governmental and international non-governmental organizations (Roche, 2000, p. 1).

However, concerns about the lack of social and environmental sustainability and the gigantism of major events have led to increasing public criticism of major sporting events and international sports organizations in recent years. Before the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, numerous people participated in demonstrations to draw attention to their discontent with forced resettlement, corruption, and the use of taxpayers' money (Ihle et al., 2017; Schallhorn, 2017). The human rights situation, environmental problems, and corruption in the host country Russia were criticized both at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup (Hutchings et al., 2015; Müller, 2015; Arnold, 2021). In various European countries, bids to host the Winter Olympics were stopped after the local population had rejected them in referendums, including projects in the Swiss Cantons of Grisons and Valais for 2022 and 2026. These developments indicate declining trust in sports organizations and sports policy (Nieland et al., 2016; Beck et al., 2018).

Criticism of major sporting events and protests against sports organizations can primarily be observed in the democratic countries of the Global North. There was hardly any criticism of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the 2018 FIFA World Cup or the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing in the respective national media (Nieland, 2023, pp. 28–29). Seippel et al. (2018) mention three conditions under which a sporting event may become politically controversial: firstly, the possibility of an open discussion, as is granted in democratic countries; secondly, the focus of the discussion on certain frames with the clear identification of problem definitions, proposed solutions, and responsible actors; and thirdly, the existence of mobilizing actors who succeed in attracting attention to their concerns.

In the case of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Brannagan and Reiche (2022) identify social, environmental, and ethical problems as the main topics of the political discussion prior to the event: Social problems include the human rights situation with the discrimination of women and LGBTQIA+ people, as well as the working conditions of foreign employees in the host country. The energy consumption of the air-conditioned stadiums, the unclear future of the newly built facilities after the event, and the high number of transfer flights from neighboring countries to bring visitors to the matches were among the environmental concerns addressed by

the critics of the World Cup. Finally, corruption within FIFA as the organizer of the event was seen as an ethical problem. The discussion increasingly took place on social media, where, in addition to journalistic media, sports organizers, and government authorities, a wide variety of interest groups and private individuals published content, often sharing their positions with like-minded people (Nieland, 2023, p. 33). Initially, human rights and environmental organizations drew attention to the problems in the country, but the calls for a boycott were mainly launched by football fans' organizations and politicians (Kiedaisch, 2022). It is not a new phenomenon that fans' organizations, who often criticize commercialism in sports, are particularly involved in protests against international sports federations (Nieland, 2023, p. 28; Mittag, 2012).

As a result of the public discussion, Qatar was unable to benefit from a positive image transfer through the organization of a major sporting event: An analysis by Dun et al. (2022) on Tweets about Qatar in the years before the World Cup shows that the country was viewed and evaluated critically, especially by users in the Global North. Various surveys conducted in German-speaking countries shortly before the World Cup indicate that a distinct majority of the respondents was in favor of boycotting the event (Infratest Dimap, 2022; NDR, 2022; Marburg, 2022; Focus Online, 2022; Wittmann, 2022). However, in their survey of over 14,000 participants from eight European countries, Gerschewski et al. (2024) show international differences in the perception of the host country: While 92% of respondents in Sweden and 87% in Germany agreed with the statement that human rights were not respected in Qatar, the approval rate was significantly lower in Eastern and South-Eastern European countries: 60% in Croatia, 55% in Hungary, and only 38% in Romania. The authors attribute their findings to differences in media availability and the framing of the World Cup coverage: The situation in Qatar is viewed much more critically by the public in countries with a pluralistic media landscape and where reporting laid more stress on the human rights situation than in countries with high media concentration and a stronger emphasis on positive aspects in the coverage of the event.

In their content analysis comparing the reporting of the New York Times with that of the Qatari newspaper Gulf Times, LeJeune and Workneh (2024) show how differently the World Cup in Qatar could be framed by the media. The New York Times criticized the lack of transparency surrounding the allocation of the World Cup, portrayed Qatar as an unsuitable host country, discussed the human rights situation extensively and considered the event as a case of sportswashing, i.e. political leaders instrumentalizing sport to be perceived as important or legitimate and to distract from social problems in their country (Boykoff, 2022). The Gulf Times rejected the criticism by Western media as disinformation or misinformation.

However, it rarely provided evidence to debunk the accusations, instead describing them as hypocritical by referring to the West's history of racism, colonialism, and discrimination of minorities. The Qatari newspaper saw its country as a beacon of modernity and as a regional leader, with statements of appreciation from Western countries being given prominence (LeJeune & Workneh, 2024, pp. 15–17).

On the one hand, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar was thus a politically highly controversial event. On the other hand, live broadcasts of football World Cup matches are among the most popular television content in numerous countries. While many media contents appeal to very specific target groups, top sporting events such as the World Cup are watched by people from any social background, regardless their level of education, milieu, status, or other interests and needs (Bertling & Schierl, 2020, pp. 17–19). The popularity of these events can be explained by their role as a source of entertainment. They provide many ingredients of entertainment as a pleasant reception phenomenon, notably suspense with dramas, conflicts, duels, and uncertainty about victory or failure (Beck, 2017, p. 1127). According to Raney (2006, p. 316), the most important factor for viewing mediated sports is “for the enjoyment and emotional satisfaction that comes from cheering on a favored team as it follows an undetermined (yet hoped for) path to victory”. In the case of the World Cup, the fans may follow and support their favorite national teams, but also particular football players who are considered stars or idols due to their outstanding performance or personality (Schierl, 2009). In addition, watching media sports fulfills other affective needs of the audience such as escapism, but also cognitive and social needs. The audience wants to keep up to date with the events and to discuss them with other people, as talking about sports is considered an easy way to interact with friends and strangers on a common ground (Raney, 2006). Finally, attending live broadcasts of World Cup matches together with other people is seen as a social event and has become increasingly popular since the 2000s (e.g., Kessler & Gerhard, 2017). In accordance with the Uses & Gratifications approach by Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1973), spectators thus watch media sports to fulfill affective, cognitive, and social needs.

People who boycotted the World Cup in Qatar were therefore consciously missing out on the gratifications obtained using media sports. On the other hand, those who had heard about the boycott discussions but still decided to watch the live matches also had to consider whether they wanted to give the arguments for a boycott more weight than their interest in entertaining football matches. In both cases, football fans found themselves in a situation of cognitive dissonance, which lead to psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019): Either they supported an event that is perceived as problematic, or they missed out on a very attractive media offering.

Dissonance can be reduced by removing dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 4). Football fans who looked forward to watching the matches but learnt about the concerns related to the World Cup in Qatar could reduce dissonance by changing their behavior, i.e. by deciding to support the boycott, which is consistent with the cognition that the World Cup is problematic. Alternatively, the fans could reduce dissonance by looking for arguments against a boycott, e.g., concerns about the politicization of sports (Thorson & Serazio, 2018) or about the effectiveness of boycott (Klein et al., 2004) and conclude that these arguments were convincing enough not to miss out on an attractive sports event. Once a decision is made, negative aspects of the chosen alternative and positive aspects of the rejected alternative are dissonant with the decision, while positive aspects of the chosen alternative and negative aspects of the rejected alternative are consonant with the decision. To reduce dissonance after a decision, individuals tend to focus on positive aspects of the chosen alternative and negative aspects of the rejected alternative, which will lead to viewing the chosen alternative as more desirable and the rejected alternative as less desirable (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 5).

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### 3 Method

As stated before, the aim of this study on the media use of Swiss football fans during the World Cup in Qatar is to find out (a) the initial amount of support for the idea to boycott the event and the proportion of the people who actually carried out the boycott, (b) the reasons why the boycott was, or was not, carried out, and (c) the general view of the public on the effectiveness of boycotts and the role of politics in sport. To get a sample as large as possible, a standardized online survey was chosen to analyze the media use during the World Cup in Qatar. Regarding their behavior in a situation of cognitive dissonance, the respondents could be divided into three groups:

1. People who never considered boycotting the World Cup and watched the matches.
2. People who initially intended to boycott the World Cup, but still watched some matches.
3. People who carried out the boycott.

The first two groups were asked about their motivation to watch live broadcasts from the World Cup, based on the concepts of cognitive, affective, and social needs as discussed in the Uses & Gratifications approach (Katz et al., 1973). Cognitive needs were operationalized with the item “To keep up to date with the latest news.” Three items were used to measure affective needs: “Because it is entertaining,” “Because I love football,” and “To support my favorite team.” Two more items dealt with escapism: “To take my mind off everyday problems” and “To relax.” The social needs category included two items: “To be able to discuss the matches with my friends and relatives” and “Because I was with friends or relatives who were watching match(es).” The participants of the survey could express their agreement or disagreement with these items by means of five-point Likert scales.

The second and the third group were asked about their reasons for intending to boycott. According to the categorization by Brannagan and Reiche (2022), three aspects were presented in the questionnaire as possible reasons for a boycott: social and human rights aspects (examples given in the questionnaire: the working conditions of foreign workers in Qatar and the discrimination of women and LGBTQIA+ people), environmental aspects (air-conditioning of the stadiums and transfer flights), and ethical aspects (corruption). A fourth reason for not watching the live broadcasts, lack of interest in the event, was added as a control item. The respondents were asked to rank the four reasons in order of importance.

Eight items were used to measure all participants’ general view of the boycott and its perceived impact, based on an existing scale by Klein, Smith and John (2004) and adapted to the context of this study. Again, five-point Likert scales were used to measure these items, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Participants could state whether they find that boycotting may change things, that it is an effective way of getting an organization to change its actions, and that every small contribution to boycott matters. Furthermore, they were asked whether they felt uncomfortable when they watched a World Cup match and when other people who followed the boycott noticed that they were watching a match, and whether they were encouraged by friends or relatives to follow the boycott. The remaining two items, “I did not need to boycott the World Cup, enough other people did” and “The boycott could jeopardize jobs and thus affect the wrong people,” had to be recoded after the survey to go in the same direction as the other items. Values closer to 1 thus mean that the boycott is considered useless, while values closer to 5 mean that individuals find the boycott relevant. The reliability of the eight items was then tested and an index created ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

A similar index was created to analyze whether respondents tend to oppose or favor the politicization of sport ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ,  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). This construct was measured using six items, of which three were based on an existing scale by

Thorson and Serazio (2018): “It is appropriate for athletes to talk publicly about politics,” “Professional sports teams should prohibit athletes from speaking publicly about politics,” and “Sport and politics should not mix.” In addition, the participants could evaluate three items focusing on specific issues in the context of the 2022 World Cup: the commitment of FIFA for social and environmental concerns, the ban of Russia from the event, and the solidarity armlets worn by various players.

To find out if some population groups were more likely to consider and implement a boycott than others, several independent variables were measured. These include gender, age, level of education, language region (German- or French-speaking Switzerland), and political orientation on a left-right scheme (measured on a 100-point scale).

The survey was published on the platform Soscisurvey just over 2 months after the final match of the World Cup in Qatar and remained online for 24 days, from February 25 to March 20, 2023. The questionnaire was available in German and in French and was freely accessible; anyone who got the link could answer the questionnaire. The link was shared via social networks (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn), the instant messaging application WhatsApp, and by e-mail. The online questionnaire provided responses from 461 participants. The sample has a slightly higher female participation rate, with 55% women and 42% men. Seven individuals did not feel they belonged to one of these two genders, and four did not wish to mention their gender. The average age of respondents in the sample is around 31, with the youngest participant being 17 and the oldest 74. 46% of the sample is between 26 and 40 years of age, and 37% in the 17 to 25 age bracket. Almost 10% of respondents are between 41 and 55 years old, and 7% are aged 56 and over. People with higher levels of education are strongly represented: Only 8% of participants have a rather low level of training, corresponding to compulsory schooling, 25% have a medium level of education, corresponding to an apprenticeship or a federal or professional maturity (high school degree). 32% of the sample have a university bachelor’s degree or a degree from a university of applied sciences, and 35% have a master’s or doctorate degree, which represents a very high level of education. In terms of language regions, almost half the sample live in French-speaking Switzerland and the other half in German-speaking Switzerland. Only 5% of the participants come from the Italian and one single person from the Rhaeto-Romanic language region. Almost 70% of the sample said they are on the left of the political spectrum, against 30% on the right.

## 4 Results

In accordance with the research questions, the overview of the survey results is divided into three parts: (a) the amount of support for the boycott, (b) the reasons for following or ignoring the boycott calls, and (c) the general view of the public on the effectiveness of boycotts and the role of politics in sport.

### 4.1 Amount of Support for the Boycott

Overall, almost half of the respondents had not planned to boycott the World Cup in Qatar, while the other half considered to miss out on the event. In the end, however, 26% of the survey participants carried out the boycott, and 24% watched matches despite their initial intention. As Table 5.1 shows, women were more likely to carry out the boycott than men [ $\chi^2$  (2,  $N = 450$ ) = 66.714,  $p < 0.001$ ]: Almost 70% of the women in the sample at least considered a boycott, but only about 30% of the men. Support for the boycott by the few people in the sample who

**Table 5.1** Support of the boycott of the 2022 World Cup overall and by gender, age, education level, political attitude, and language region

	Boycott carried out (%)	Boycott only intended (%)	No boycott intended (%)
All respondents (n = 461)	26.5	24.1	49.5
Women (n = 254)	38.2	28.7	33.1
Men (n = 196)	11.2	18.9	69.9
Other (n = 11)	27.3	9.1	63.6
Age 17–25 (n = 173)	30.1	27.7	42.2
Age 26–40 (n = 211)	26.1	22.7	51.2
Age 41–55 (n = 44)	20.5	20.5	59.1
Age 56 and over (n = 33)	18.2	18.2	63.6
Compulsory school (n = 35)	20.0	5.7	74.3
High school or apprenticeship (n = 115)	27.8	21.7	50.4
Bachelor or university of applied sciences (n = 149)	28.2	30.9	40.9
Master or doctorate (n = 162)	25.3	23.5	51.2
Politically left (n = 315)	32.1	29.2	38.7
Politically right (n = 142)	14.8	12.7	72.5
German-speaking (n = 219)	31.1	25.1	43.8
French-speaking (n = 216)	23.6	24.1	52.3

identify as neither male nor female lies between the two other sexes, both in terms of intending the boycott and carrying it out. There is a tendency that younger people were more likely than older people to consider a boycott as well as to carry it out, but the differences between the age groups are statistically not significant [ $\chi^2(6, N = 461) = 8.289, p = 0.218$ ].

The support for the boycott among the respondents increased with their level of education, but only up to the bachelor's degree. At the highest level of education, i.e. among people with a master's degree or a doctorate, the intention to boycott was somewhat lower again. This could be related to the higher average age of this group and the fact that older people were less willing to follow the boycott calls. Overall, the differences by level of education are again statistically significant [ $\chi^2(6, N = 461) = 15.602, p = 0.016$ ].

There is a highly significant difference in dealing with the boycott calls regarding the political position of the respondents on the left-right scheme [ $\chi^2(2, N = 457) = 44.771, p < 0.001$ ]: Over 70% of people who see themselves as politically right-wing had not planned to boycott the World Cup, while on the left of the political spectrum, more than 60% of the respondents intended a boycott, and more than 30% carried it out.

Finally, a comparison of the Swiss language regions shows that people in the German-speaking part of the country were more likely to consider and to carry out a boycott than people from French-speaking Switzerland. There are thus some similarities with the audience behavior as it was observed in the large neighboring countries sharing the same language: While boycott calls were obviously followed by many football fans in Germany, this was not the case in France (Dorsaz, 2022). However, the difference between the two Swiss language regions is not statistically significant [ $\chi^2(2, N = 435) = 3.875, p = 0.144$ ]. Due to the low number of people from Italian- and Romansh-speaking Switzerland in the sample, it is not possible to compare data from all Swiss language regions.

## 4.2 Reasons for Following or Ignoring the Boycott Calls

For both the people who only considered a boycott and those who carried it out, social and human rights aspects are the most important reason to miss out on watching the World Cup matches, environmental aspects rank second, and ethical aspects third (see Table 5.2). In total, 56% of both groups put social and human rights aspects in the first place; environmental aspects were the most important issue for 21%, and ethical aspects for 6%. "Lack of interest" is stated by far as the least important reason by both groups, 64% of all respondents put it in the last

**Table 5.2** Ranking of the reasons for a boycott by people who at least intended to boycott the World Cup

	Boycott carried out (n = 122)		Boycott only intended (n = 111)		H(1)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Social and human rights aspects	1.80	0.968	1.69	1.077	2.771 <sup>a</sup>
Environmental aspects	2.14	0.846	2.12	0.735	0.037
Ethical aspects	2.93	0.898	2.81	0.654	2.870 <sup>a</sup>
Lack of interest	3.12	1.175	3.38	1.112	4.702*

*Note:* Means and standard deviation of the ranking stated by the respondents (1 = most important, 4 = least important). Means were compared using a Kruskal-Wallis test  
<sup>a</sup>p < 0.1 \*p < 0.05

place. A comparison of the mean values using a Kruskal-Wallis test shows only weak differences between the two groups. However, “lack of interest” seems to be a slightly more important factor for those who carried out the boycott ( $p = 0.03$ ).

The concerns about the situation in Qatar and about the role of FIFA as the organizer of the World Cup are also reflected in the perceived image of the country and the organization. Only 3% of the respondents who at least considered a boycott found that Qatar is an attractive country, and 7% agreed to the statement that FIFA is a positive force in football ( $n = 233$ ). The approval rate is slightly higher, but still rather poor among the survey participants who had not intended a boycott: 12% of them have a positive view of Qatar, and 21% of FIFA ( $n = 228$ ).

Despite all concerns, many fans who first intended to boycott the event still watched some World Cup matches. However, their motives were different to those of people who never considered missing out on the event: While football fans for whom the boycott was never an issue gave more importance to cognitive and affective motives to watch sports, a social motive was most important for people who initially considered boycotting the event: being with friends or relatives who were watching the matches. Table 5.3 shows that all differences between the two groups are highly significant according to a Kruskal-Wallis test.

The emphasis on the social benefits of watching the matches with other fans can thus be seen as a justification for why an intended boycott was not implemented. The respondents who decided to watch World Cup matches despite their original intention shared the responsibility for this decision with other people, which could be a strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, football fans who find the sport very entertaining and have a strong attachment to their favorite teams were less likely to consider boycotting: the event was too attractive for them to miss out.

**Table 5.3** Motives for watching World Cup matches by people who did not carry out the boycott

	Boycott only intended (n = 111)		No boycott intended (n = 228)		H(1)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
I watched World Cup matches...					
...because I was with friends or relatives who were watching matches.	4.02	1.15	3.61	1.20	13.062**
...because it is entertaining.	3.21	1.20	3.93	1.07	33.522**
...to support my favorite team.	2.99	1.52	3.72	1.30	17.807**
...to keep up to date with the latest news.	2.69	1.16	3.40	1.21	26.624**
...to be able to discuss the matches with my friends and relatives.	2.59	1.32	3.26	1.17	18.947**
...to relax.	2.41	1.27	3.31	1.30	32.731**
...because I love football.	2.41	1.36	3.37	1.53	29.220**
...to take my mind off everyday problems.	1.80	1.14	2.18	1.17	10.830**

*Note:* Values are measured on a five-level scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = partly disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = partly agree, 5 = strongly agree. Means were compared using a Kruskal-Wallis test

\*\* $p < 0.01$

### 4.3 Views on the Effectiveness of Boycotts and the Politicization of Sports

As explained in the methods section, index variables were created to determine the respondents' general attitude towards the effectiveness of boycotts and the politicization of sport. The values of these variables are the mean values of the ratings of eight respectively six items on the corresponding topic on a five-point Likert scale. Higher values of these variables signify that the attitude of the respondents towards boycotts is more positive, and that they are more likely to support political actions in the world of sports.

Table 5.4 shows that there is a strong correlation between the two index variables: People who see boycotts as an effective means to pursue political issues also tend to have a positive view on the politicization of sports. Furthermore, the analysis confirms that younger people and women see boycotts more positively than older people and men. The correlations are highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Politicization of sports is better accepted by younger people than by older ones ( $p = 0.025$ ), while there is just a small difference regarding this aspect between men and women, the latter being slightly more in favor of politicization ( $p = 0.064$ ).

**Table 5.4** Views on the effectiveness of boycotts and the politicization of sports by age, gender, and political position

	View on boycotts	View on politicization	Age	Gender (male/female)
View on politicization	0.386**			
Age	-0.172**	-0.104*		
Gender (male/female)	-0.282**	-0.086 <sup>a</sup>	0.115*	
Political position (left/right)	-0.477**	-0.445**	0.156**	0.196**

*Note:* n = 461. Correlation between metric variables was measured using Pearson's R. The gender variable could be considered as a dummy variable after persons who identified as neither male nor female (n = 11) had been excluded from the analyses involving this variable, since the interest was to explore the differences between men and women. Political orientation on the left-right scheme was measured on a 100-point scale

<sup>a</sup>p < 0.1 \*p < 0.05 \*\*p < 0.01

However, the strongest correlations refer to the political position on the left-right scheme: People on the left side of the political spectrum are more likely to support boycotts and political actions in sport, while people on the right are more skeptical towards boycott actions and more often take the position that sports and politics should be clearly separated. Since politically left positions are overrepresented among the women and the young people in the sample, the age and gender differences revealed by this study may be at least partly explained by the political positions of the respondents.

In general, boycott campaigns are viewed rather positively by the respondents. More than 60% of all survey participants strongly or partly agree with the statements that a boycott can help to change things and effectively persuade affected organizations to act. Even among respondents who did not intend to take part in the boycott of the World Cup, the approval rate for these items was around 50%. On the other hand, this group of people was more skeptical regarding the statement that small contributions to a boycott matters, and they agreed more to the concern that a boycott could affect the wrong people. The latter argument was supported by 41% of the respondents who did not intend a boycott and by 29% of those who planned a boycott and did not carry it out, but only by 21% of those who boycotted the event. While the principle that sport and politics must not mix is slightly more popular among respondents who did not intend to boycott than among the other groups (45%, compared to 27% of those who intended to boycott and 31% of those who carried out a boycott), all three groups agree with well over 6% that clubs should not prohibit their players from making political statements in public.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this survey was to get more information about how football fans in Switzerland followed the boycott calls for the World Cup in Qatar, for which reasons they carried out or at least intended a boycott, and what were the reasons if they still watched the matches at the World Cup. The study confirms that the topic of a World Cup boycott was widely discussed in Switzerland and that a considerable part of the population was critical of the event and the host country, like in other countries in Northern and Western Europe. Of the 461 survey participants, about half initially intended to boycott the World Cup, but only a quarter of all respondents did not actually watch a World Cup match. According to the survey results, the typical World Cup boycotters in Switzerland are young, female, have a university degree, are politically on the left and live in German-speaking Switzerland. However, there are only small differences between the language regions.

The most important reason for a World Cup boycott – whether carried out or only intended—was the human rights situation in Qatar. More than half of the respondents who at least intended to miss out on the World Cup matches named this issue as the most important reason for boycotting. Environmental aspects rank second, and ethical aspects such as corruption rank third. Most respondents ranked “lack of interest” as the least important reason, but this item was slightly more prevalent among those who actually carried out the boycott. For people who were not very strongly interested in the World Cup, it was obviously easier to miss out on the matches.

A social motive is the most important reason for non-compliance with an intended boycott: “Because I was with friends or relatives who were watching matches” was the most popular motive to watch the matches among the respondents who initially intended a boycott, and the only motive which was given more importance by this group than by the football fans who had never intended a boycott. People having not carried out an intended boycott thus reduced their cognitive dissonance by transferring the decision to watch the matches to others, while those who never wanted to follow the boycott increased consonance by laying more stress on the entertaining value of the event and the desire to support their idols. The findings on the motives for watching the matches also illustrate that the World Cup is still an important social event that many people find difficult to avoid.

A majority of the respondents view boycott actions rather positive and do not object to politicization of sport. This also applies to the people in the sample who did not intend to boycott the World Cup, although their approval rates for the items

in these areas are considerably lower. However, people on the left side of the political spectrum are even more likely to see boycott as an effective political instrument and political actions in the world of sports as legitimate, and they were also more likely to follow the boycott calls in this particular case.

An important limitation of this study is the fact that the survey sample is not representative. Groups tending to have a positive attitude towards the boycott—people on the political left, young people, women—are overrepresented. It thus can be expected that the overall approval rate for the boycott of the World Cup in Qatar among the Swiss population is significantly lower than among the people in this survey. In addition, retrospective surveys have the problem of social desirability. Nevertheless, the survey sheds light on the importance of the various reasons that led people to support or not support the boycott. For further research, it would be interesting to learn more about the process of how they came to their decision: Which media did they use to inform themselves about the forthcoming World Cup, and how were the boycott discussions covered in these media in the weeks prior to the event? A content analysis of this coverage would thus be an interesting further study.

Despite its limitations, the study confirms that many Swiss people are critical of developments in connection with major sporting events and have considered boycotting the World Cup. This criticism can be seen as a call to sports organizations to organize future events in a more social and ecological way.

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# Women at the Microphone—Online Survey on the Perception of Female TV Football Commentators in the Context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

Romy Schwaiger

## 1 Research Idea

During the 2016 European Men’s Football Championship, Claudia Neumann was the first female sports journalist to commentate live on a men’s national team match on German television. This and subsequent assignments were not without consequences—a veritable shitstorm arose on social media (cf. Gilbert, 2018). In recent years, it has increasingly been male football commentators who have been criticized in the media for verbal slurs, among other things (cf. Sportbild, 2021, among others). At the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, which was broadcast by a total of three broadcasters—ARD, ZDF and MagentaTV—three women commented on selected matches for the first time: Christina Graf was on duty for ARD, Claudia Neumann commented on ZDF and Christina Rann was at the microphone for some matches on MagentaTV. However, women are still in the minority compared to men in the commentary job. Rann herself speaks of “[...] one of the last bastions in football [...]” (Horn, 2023) and hopes that it will become the norm for a woman to commentate on men’s football matches on television. But do viewers see it that way? How do they perceive the work of female TV football commentators and how

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are they rated? In order to answer these and other questions, a study was conducted to investigate whether female TV football commentators are recognized by viewers at all and how they are perceived.

The following research questions were of particular interest in the study:

1. What are the characteristics of good female TV football commentators?
2. How well known are female TV football commentators among viewers?
3. How was the performance of commentators Christina Graf, Claudia Neumann and Christina Rann rated during the 2022 World Cup?

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## 2 State of Research

Studies relating to quality in sports journalism and specifically to live commentary in sports communication research have been conducted since the 1970s (cf. e.g. Bryant et al., 1977, 1981; Danneboom, 1988; Sullivan, 1991; Marr & Stiehler, 1995; Schaffrath, 2003, 2008, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006; Lang, 2009; Hendrichske, 2012). Over the past 10 years in particular, the topic has increasingly become the focus of academic attention—both nationally (cf. e.g. Vögele & Gözl, 2016; Wiske, 2017; Horky et al., 2018, 2019; Schaffrath, 2018a, b, 2019; Schwaiger, 2022a, b) and internationally (cf. Barnfield, 2013; Psutka et al., 2014; Mathon et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2016; Hassanvandi & Golchinnezhad, 2022; Kunert & Kuni, 2023).

As part of their study, Vögele and Gözl (2016, p. 26ff.) examined the match between Spain and the Netherlands at the 2014 World Cup using a combination of methods consisting of a quantitative survey ( $n = 73$ ) and quantitative content analysis of the live commentary. As part of an experiment, one group was shown the match with live commentary, while a second group only heard the stadium commentary. They found that the live commentary influenced the assessment of individual players and the performance of the coaches and referees and also acted as a cue. The group that only heard the stadium soundtrack also focused more on the visual information that was shown.

In a study, Schaffrath (2018a, p. 51ff.; 2018b, 2019, p. 294ff.) conducted a content analysis of the linguistic quality criteria of live football commentary on television during the 2016 European Football Championship. He analyzed the live commentary of a total of twelve matches based on seven quality criteria. Among other things, it was found that a relatively high number of slips of the tongue as well as grammatical and syntax errors were made. Metaphors, empty phrases, superlatives and augmentatives were also used. Overall, it was found that the linguistic quality of the live commentary could be improved through more rhetorical quality and

conceptual creativity. Schaffrath also found that all commentators included a lot of background information, information on tactics and conclusions in their broadcasts. However, player mix-ups also occurred in 75% of the matches analyzed, although the frequency of these varied depending on the commentator. When goals were scored during the match, the commentators were able to correctly identify the goalscorers and assist providers in most cases. The commentators also provided a lot of background information as well as information on tactics and drew many conclusions.

In a research study, Schwaiger (2022a, b) analyzed how the performance of TV football commentators is rated and whether more female commentators are desired on TV microphones in the future. It became clear that the 171 people surveyed tended to rate the performance of male commentators (grade 2.7) slightly better than that of female commentators (grade 3.4). However, the average scores also show that viewers are generally rather dissatisfied with the performance of all commentators. It also emerged that 27% of survey participants believe that more female commentators should be used, although around a third (32%) also voted against this. The survey also investigated whether female commentators are criticized more often than their male colleagues. Just over two thirds of respondents agreed with the statement that “female football commentators are criticized more often than their male colleagues”.

A study by Kunert and Kuni (2023, p. 631ff.) focused on the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in live football coverage from the perspective of German commentators. A total of 28 TV commentators, one radio commentator and one expert working for German TV broadcasters and streaming platforms were asked how they assess the role of journalistic and entertainment values in their work. The majority found that journalistic values are more important than entertainment values. Furthermore, sound journalistic expertise and football knowledge are considered to be the most important.

Gender research in sport science has been conducted intensively since the 1980s. Various researchers at national level have focused in particular on the topics of sport and gender (cf., among others, Klein, 1983; Klein, 1986), gender constructions in sports reporting (cf. Hartmann-Tews & Rulofs, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010; Rulofs & Hartmann-Tews, 2006, 2011, 2017), women in media sport (cf. e.g. Pfister, 2011; Knaut & Heidler, 2017) and the sexualization of sport in the media (cf. e.g. Schaaf & Nieland, 2011). Internationally, the main focus has been on gender and sex diversity in sport organizations (cf. e.g. Ross & Shiner, 2008), sex, gender and sexuality in sport: queer injuries (cf. e.g. Krane, 2019), development, gender and sport (cf. e.g. Zipp et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2021) and gender equity in sports coaching (cf. e.g. Norman, 2022).

Gender research in communication studies has been taking place in Germany since the mid-1990s. Particularly noteworthy are the studies on gender structure of television (cf. e.g. Klaus & Röser, 1996), communication science and gender studies (cf. e.g. Klaus et al., 2001; Klaus, 2005), media gender stereotypes (cf. e.g. Magin & Stark, 2010) and media gender construction (cf. e.g. Engelmann & Etzrodt, 2014). Studies have been published at an international level, particularly in the last 10 years. These dealt with coverage of gender, nationality and sport (cf. e.g. Eagleman et al., 2014), gender bias in sport media (cf. e.g. Shifflett et al., 2016; Grace & Mueller, 2019), using sport media exposure to promote gender equality (cf. e.g. Vezzali et al., 2023) and how gender affects the newsworthiness of sports news (cf. e.g. Ihle, 2023).

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### 3 Theoretical Localization

The study deals with live commentary as a journalistic style. According to Schaffrath (2018b), it is considered a “‘hybrid form’ of reportage and commentary, as it must fulfill the requirements of both stylistic devices”. Accordingly, reportage is “the most lively and subjective journalistic form of presentation” (Liesem, 2015, p. 79). Live reporting also requires “a high level of journalistic skill and is [...] the pinnacle of reporters’ work” (Seip, 2017, p. 215). The reporter, or in this case the commentator, must be able to see and describe what is happening on the pitch and provide background information to the viewers on screen (cf. Seip, 2017, p. 216).

In contrast, the commentary is “the basic figure of criticism”, which is intended to “pass judgment, take a stand, adopt a position” (Schalkowski, 2011, p. 19). In commentary, the author’s “decided, explicit opinion is permitted and required” (Neuberger & Kapern, 2013, p. 53). It is therefore a pointed expression of opinion (cf. Böhlz, 2018, p. 173). Every live commentary on television should therefore contain elements of both reportage and commentary. In principle, two types of live commentary can be distinguished. On the one hand, previously created reports on a sporting event can be commented on live during the broadcast. On the other hand, sports events are commented on in real time while they are taking place (cf. Scheu, 1994, p. 250; Vögele & Gözl, 2016, p. 27). The commentator is not expected to “[...] verbally repeat the information through the image, but to supplement it” (Zimmer, 2016, p. 142). Accordingly, the existing images should be supplemented with additional information, in particular with explanations, background information, personal information and statistical data, but also by reproducing the atmosphere in the stadium and describing what may be happening outside the camera perspective (cf. Zimmer, 2016, p. 142).

According to Kunert and Kuni (2023, p. 634), live commentators are a special type of sports journalists who have different tasks compared to their colleagues in the newsroom. They have a major influence on how viewers perceive a football match. “It is assumed that even the frequency of certain mentions and the choice of positive or negative assessments by the reporter can change the perception and opinion of an event” (Schaffrath, 2003, p. 86). Or as Barnfield (2013, p. 331) states: “Commentary of a soccer match that is broadcast live on television is a complicated process.” This is because commentators not only explain to viewers what is happening on the pitch, but their task is also to put the game into context (cf. Barnfield, 2013, p. 331).

Commentators should be able to provide background and context as well as pro and con arguments. They can also express their own opinion or take a clear position as long as it is backed up with facts. “A sports journalistic commentary evaluates, classifies and must not turn into emotional chatter without sense and reason” (Bölz, 2018, p. 174). Accordingly, a high level of expertise and extensive background knowledge should also be present (cf. Schaffrath, 2018a, p. 56). These characteristics were also assessed accordingly by the interviewees in this study. However, according to Wiske (2017, p. 47), neutrality, distance and credibility are also “positive quality characteristics [...] that stand for the sustainable functionality of sports media and should therefore be part of live reporting”.

Due to the discussion about gender differences, the study can also be assigned to gender studies in sport and communication science. According to Hartmann-Tews, Gieß-Stüber, Klein, Kleindienst-Cachay and Petry (2003, p. 15), the feminist theoretical model in women’s studies states that a gender binary order prevails in all societies worldwide. However, this gender order and the behavioral repertoire of men and women is interculturally variable and therefore independent of biological sex. In research, a distinction is made between “sex” as a biologically anchored sex and “gender” as a social gender (cf. Hartmann-Tews et al., 2003, p. 14). The gender order is therefore independent of biological sex. In sport in particular, however, gender can be seen as a dimension of social (inequality) order. In this historically evolved order, sport is seen as a primary field of activity for men, in which women are usually only considered under a separate designation as the “special”, “second” or “deficient” gender. “The absolutization of male maximum performance makes women’s sport appear deficient” (Gieß-Stüber, 2009, p. 36). For example, in normal usage, a Football World Cup always represents the men’s event, while the women’s event is always referred to as the “Women’s Football World Cup”. This shows the social construction of gender inequality.

Furthermore, the study can be linked to the emergence of prejudices and stereotypes as a theoretical basis (cf. Gieß-Stüber, 2009, p. 23ff.). A certain gender

construction already takes place in school sports when sports lessons are usually organized in gender-segregated groups so that girls and boys can develop their skills without being disadvantaged. There are also stereotypical ideas about the sports and behavior patterns of boys and girls. While boys tend to play team sports and games with a competitive character and direct contact with opponents, such as football or field hockey, girls tend to be associated with individual sports such as horse riding, dancing or gymnastics.

These stereotypical ideas also manifest themselves in the ideal image of women that is shaped by the mass media. “The media - and in particular film, television and advertising - are seen as problematic socialization instances, as they provide distorted and trivialized representations of women” (Hipfl, 2008, p. 476). In particular, one-sided and clichéd representations of women are perceived by the media as a reflection of reality (cf. Hipfl, 2008, p. 476). This is particularly linked to the sexualization of female sport in the media (cf. Rulofs & Hartmann-Tews, 2017, p. 67). For example, female athletes are often shown in erotic poses in editorial reporting. Appearance and an attractive aura thus become more of a focus than sporting achievements (cf. Schaaf & Nieland, 2011, p. 10).

Journalism, and sports journalism in particular, was long considered a male domain. The increase in the number of female journalists is due in particular to the change in social gender discourse. In addition, more and more women’s initiatives and gender equality measures were promoted in media organizations (cf. Keil & Dorer, 2023, p. 271). However, the sports sector is still considered “[...] the last bastion of hegemonic white masculinity, and it is therefore not surprising that male-coded values and prejudices determine the journalistic way of working” (Dorer & Marschik, 2023, p. 835). According to this, the proportion of women in the sports journalism sector in Germany and Austria is currently between ten and 13% (cf. Dorer & Marschik, 2023, p. 839). For this reason, this research paper also focuses on female sports journalists and in particular the type of female TV football commentator, which has so far been rare in the sports media landscape.

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## 4 Study Design

In order to research the perception and evaluation of female TV football commentators at the 2022 World Cup in the best possible way, an online survey was used as a method. Since the further development of the internet, the online survey has become an important variant (cf. Brosius et al., 2016, p. 112). As it is network-based and takes place on the internet, it can also be referred to as an internet-based survey (cf. Schnell et al., 2018, p. 343). The major advantage is that the questionnaire can

be designed to be interactive and multimedia-based. For example, the link to the questionnaire can be sent by email, via social media or messenger apps. Survey software based on HTML1 software is normally used to host the questionnaire. These include providers such as Unipark, which was used in the course of this study. The online survey tool belongs to the company Tivian, which is a leading provider in the field of employee experience, customer experience and market research (cf. Tivian n.d.).

The target group selected was people interested in football who are invested in major sporting events such as the World Cup and also watch them on television. The study was designed in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and entered the field phase before the semi-finals began. Between December 12 and 26, 2022, 1,386 people from all over Germany took part in the online survey.

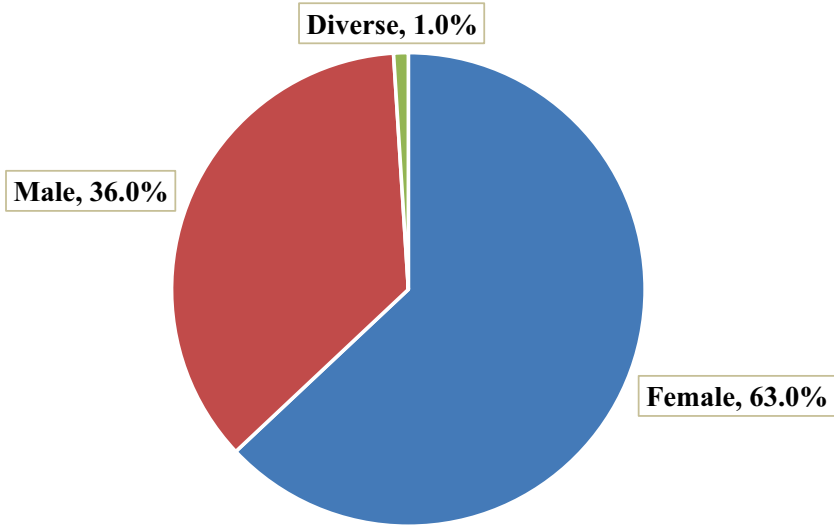
The advantage of survey software, like Unipark, is that the results can be exported directly as a numerical table via the online questionnaire tool. This table can then be imported into a statistics program for further analysis. At the end of the study period, the data set was imported into the IBM SPSS 28 statistics program and then cleansed. “Before analyzing the data, it is particularly important to perform a good and conscientious data cleansing” (Taddicken & Batinic, 2014, p. 172). Once the data cleansing was complete, the response items for the individual questions were assigned codes with labels, and numbers were entered for the missing values. This served to have SPSS analyze descriptive frequencies in the first step, which was the basis for creating the graphs and tables in the results section. The most important facts were then also checked for possible significance. If significance was found, the effect size was calculated in the next step in order to be able to make valid statements about the results.

Even if the sample cannot claim to be representative due to an arbitrary selection, the study does offer some interesting results on the perception and evaluation of female TV football commentators by viewers.

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## 5 Results

Of the 1,386 participants, 63.0% stated that they were female, while 36.0% were male and 1.0% were diverse (see Fig. 6.1). It is particularly striking that almost two thirds of the participants were women, which is rather unusual when it comes to surveys on football. This distribution can be explained by the distribution of the link to the online survey. As a male social media influencer with a five-digit number of followers shared the link to the online survey via his story function on the



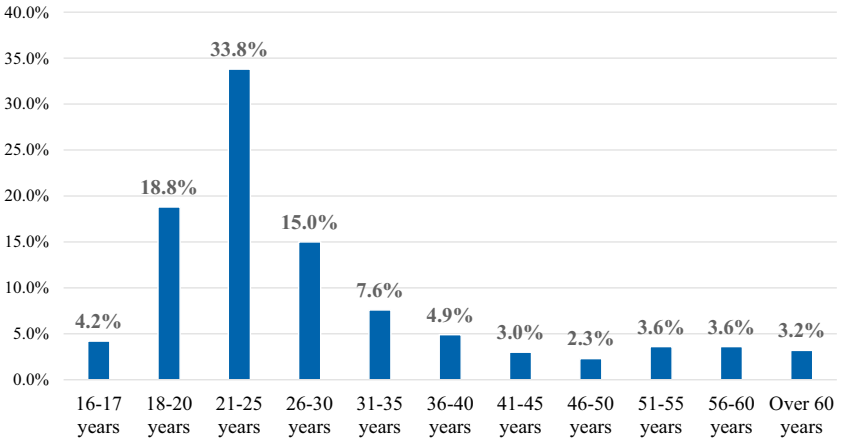
**Fig. 6.1** Gender distribution of participants;  $n = 1.386$ . (Source: own illustration)

platform Instagram, female subscribers in particular were encouraged to take part in the online survey.

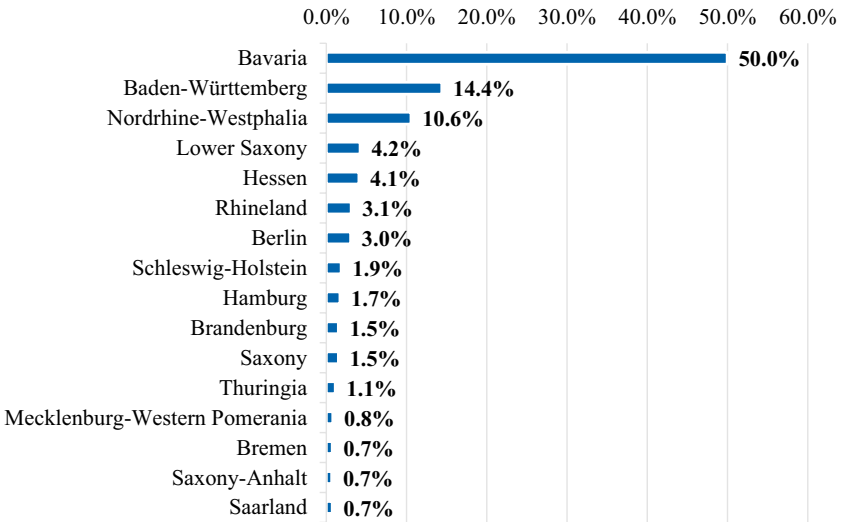
With regard to the age distribution of the participants, it is noticeable that the age range of 21- to 25-year-olds accounts for the largest proportion at 33.8%, followed by 18- to 20-year-olds (18.8%) and 26- to 30-year-olds (15.0%). Overall, four out of five respondents are aged between 16 and 35 (79.4%) (see Fig. 6.2). This disproportionate distribution of the younger age groups can also be explained by the target group of the online survey.

The aim of the study was to acquire participants from all German federal states, which was successfully achieved. However, there are clear conurbations with the federal states of Bavaria (50.0%), Baden-Württemberg (14.4%) and North Rhine-Westphalia (10.6%). As the online survey was conducted in Bavaria, it is easy to explain why half of all respondents came from this state. All other federal states were represented by between 0.7% and 4.2% of participants (see Fig. 6.3).

In order to determine the popularity of the three TV football commentators Christina Graf, Claudia Neumann and Christina Rann, the participants were asked to name the respective commentator using pictures. This was done in the first step by choosing between three response items. Only if the respondents stated that they knew this sports journalist they were asked to enter the name in an open text field.



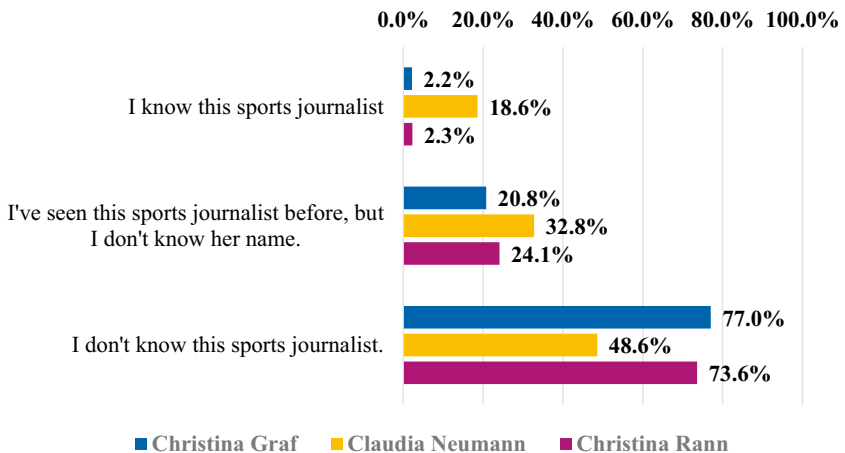
**Fig. 6.2** Age distribution of participants; n = 1.386. (Source: own illustration)



**Fig. 6.3** Participants by German federal state; n = 1.386. (Source: own illustration)

Of those surveyed, 18.6% knew Claudia Neumann and were able to name her correctly (see Fig. 6.4). In contrast, significantly fewer people were able to name Christina Rann (2.3%) and Christina Graf (2.2%). In the case of Claudia Neumann, 32.8% said they had seen the person at least once but were unable to name her. The figures for Christina Rann (24.1%) and Christina Graf (20.8%) were also lower here. It is also striking that, at 77.0% (Christina Graf) and 73.6% (Christina Rann), almost three quarters of participants do not know the two sports journalists Graf and Rann at all. The figure for Claudia Neumann (48.6%) is significantly lower. This may be due to the fact that Neumann has been working as a TV football commentator for much longer and is also employed by public television, which is free to air. Although Christina Graf had already worked for the pay-TV channel Sky before her time as an ARD commentator, she mainly commented on 2nd Bundesliga matches. Christina Rann was also at the microphone as a commentator for the first time during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. As MagentaTV is also a pay-TV channel, not all viewers presumably had access to the matches broadcast there. In addition, Rann did not commentate on any of the matches involving Germany, but was involved in four other games at the World Cup.

Respondents were then able to use a Likert scale from 1 = “very important” to 5 = “not important” to indicate how important certain characteristics are to them in female TV football commentators. They were asked to rate the following characteristics: “confidence with rules”, “eloquence”, “self-confidence”, “understanding

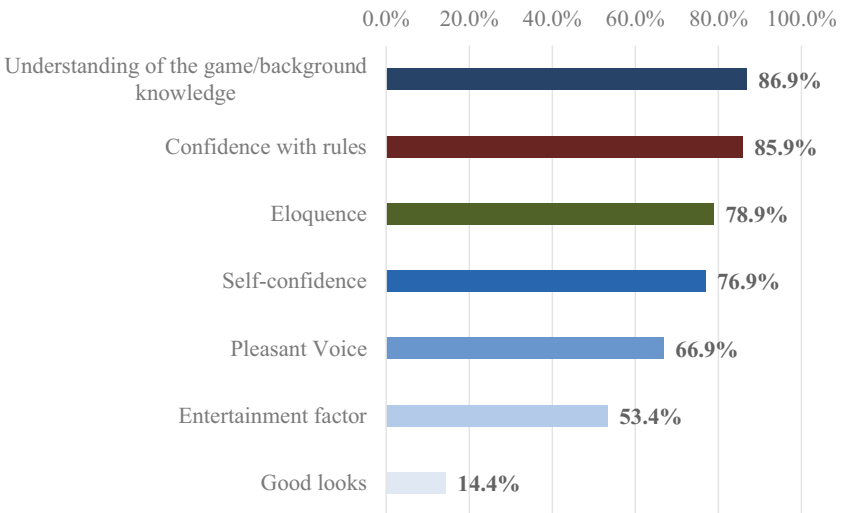


**Fig. 6.4** Comparison of awareness of female TV football commentators; n = 1.156–1.182. (Source: own illustration)

of the game/background knowledge”, “pleasant voice”, “entertainment factor” and “good looks”.

Overall, six of the seven characteristics received relatively high scores of over 50%, with the results of the two response items “very important” and “important” being cumulated. The most important characteristics for the participants were “understanding of the game/background knowledge” (86.9%), “confidence with rules” (85.9%), “eloquence” (78.9%) and “self-confidence” (76.9%) (see Fig. 6.5). The characteristic “good looks” is very important to only 14.4%. This can presumably be explained by the fact that female commentators are behind the camera for most of the broadcasting time and therefore good looks are not an essential prerequisite for the job. Instead, viewers pay attention to other soft skills that are essential for working as a commentator. In particular, viewers hope that the commentators can classify a match with a good understanding and background knowledge and that they have a certain degree of certainty about the rules in controversial scenes in order to be able to provide explanations. To be able to assess controversial scenes in a matter of seconds is one of the most important characteristics a commentator should possess (cf. Flügel, 2009, p. 212).

Interestingly, the entertainment factor (53.4%) still plays a role for just over half of respondents, but entertainment is slightly less important when commenting on a



**Fig. 6.5** Importance of characteristics for female TV football commentators; added values “very important/important”; n = 1.134. (Source: own illustration)

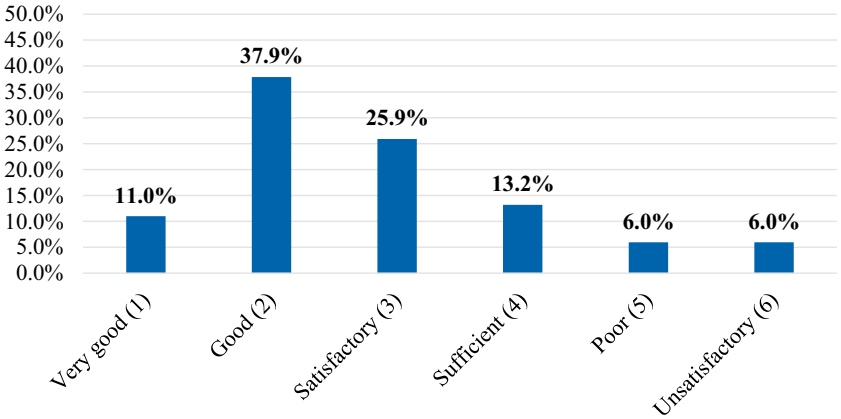
broadcast compared to other characteristics that are directly related to the game itself. Looking at the response behavior of both genders, it becomes clear that good looks tend to be slightly more important to male participants (19.8%) than to female participants (10.8%). In contrast, female respondents placed slightly more value on understanding of the game or background knowledge (88.3% female compared to 84.3% male), a pleasant voice (69.0% female compared to 65.5% male) and the entertainment factor (54.5% female compared to 52.8% male). The Pearson chi-square test shows that the two genders differ significantly with regard to the results for understanding of the game/background knowledge ( $r = 0.111$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), confidence with rules ( $r = 0.103$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ), eloquence ( $r = 0.118$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), self-confidence ( $r = 0.126$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and good looks ( $r = 0.156$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, there is only a weak effect for all of these characteristics.

Finally, the participants were asked to rate the individual performance of the three female TV commentators Christina Graf, Claudia Neumann and Christina Rann at the 2022 FIFA World Cup. As the performance could only be assessed by those who had watched at least one match commentated by the respective woman, a filter question was activated in advance. Accordingly, only those participants who stated in this filter question that they had seen a match involving Christina Graf, Claudia Neumann or Christina Rann answered the subsequent questions. Therefore the sample numbers for the evaluation of Christina Graf were reduced to  $n = 235$ , of Claudia Neumann to  $n = 305$  and of Christina Rann to  $n = 35$ .

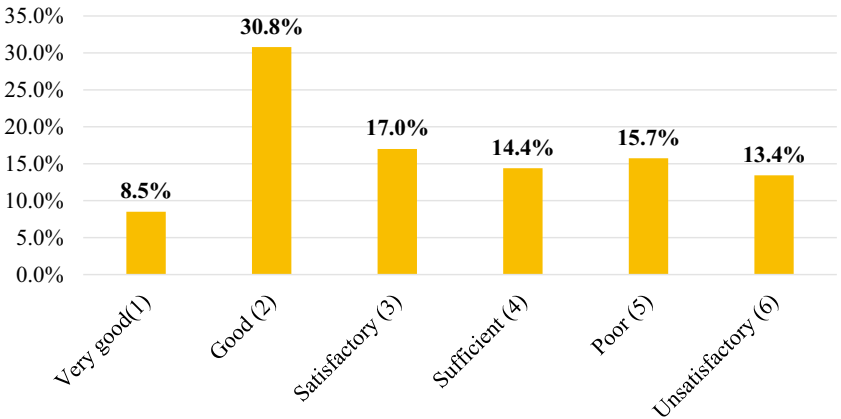
Christina Graf's performance was rated as "very good" or "good" by almost half of the participants (48.9%). In contrast, only 12.0% found Graf's performance to be "poor" or "unsatisfactory" (see Fig. 6.6).

In comparison, 39.3% of respondents rated Claudia Neumann's performance as "very good" or "good" (see Fig. 6.7). Neumann's values are therefore slightly below Graf's results. In addition, almost a third (29.1%) were of the opinion that Neumann's performance was "poor" or "unsatisfactory". Clear differences can therefore be seen here. This may be related to the fact that Claudia Neumann has been working as a TV football commentator for a public broadcaster for much longer and has already experienced so-called "shitstorms" on social media several times. This could therefore be an explanation as to why the respondents rate the performance significantly lower overall, as they follow public opinion as expressed on social media.

Finally, the performance of Christina Rann was rated as "very good" or "good" by a total of 42.8% of those surveyed. However, here too, one in five people thought that her performance during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar were "poor" or "unsatisfactory" (see Fig. 6.8). However, as only 35 people answered this question on the basis of the preceding filter question, this result should be treated with

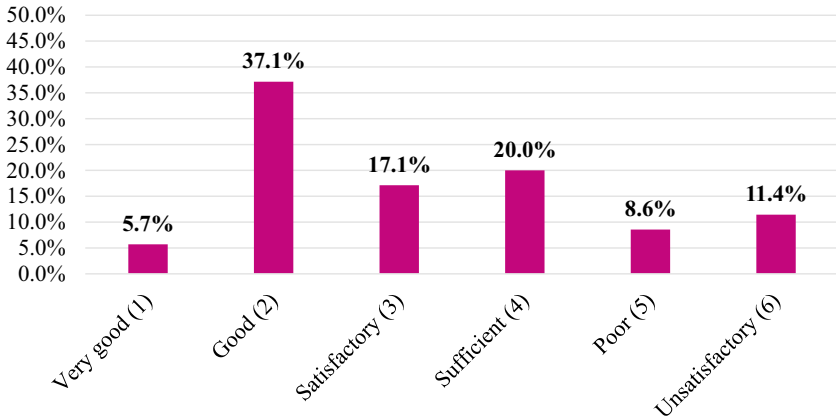


**Fig. 6.6** Assessment of the performance of TV football commentator Christina Graf; n = 235. (Source: own illustration)

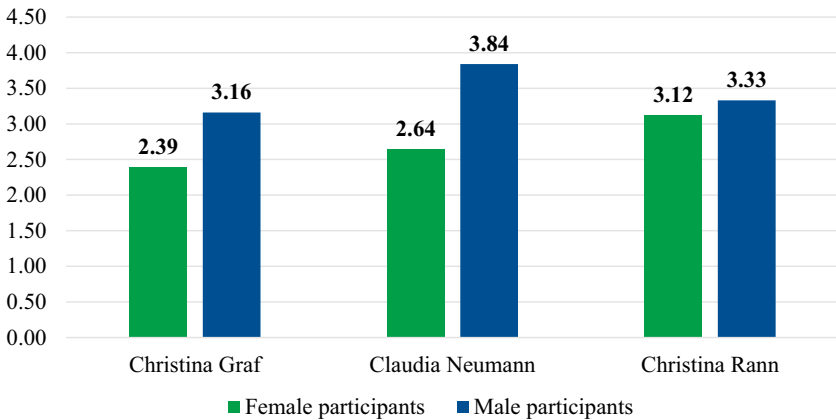


**Fig. 6.7** Assessment of the performance of TV football commentator Claudia Neumann; n = 305. (Source: own illustration)

caution due to the small sample size. It is clear from this that, compared to Graf and Neumann, who both commented on World Cup matches on public television, Christina Rann was perceived considerably less frequently as a commentator on the pay-TV channel MagentaTV.



**Fig. 6.8** Assessment of the performance of TV football commentator Christina Rann; n = 35. (Source: own illustration)



**Fig. 6.9** Mean values of the assessment of the performance of Christina Graf, Claudia Neumann and Christina Rann; n = 35–305. (Source: own illustration)

Looking at the average school grades, it is noticeable that Christina Graf was rated best with an average grade of 2.83. She was followed by Christina Rann with 3.23 and Claudia Neumann with 3.38. It was also interesting to see how the response behavior of the two genders differed. It is noticeable here that male respondents rated all three female TV commentators lower overall than female respondents (see Fig. 6.9).

The biggest difference can be seen in the assessment of Claudia Neumann. While female respondents rated her performance at 2.64, almost similar to Christina Graf's performance (2.39), male respondents had a significantly lower opinion (3.84). However, differences can also be seen between Christina Graf and Christina Rann. This makes it clear that male viewers are much more critical of the use of female TV commentators than female viewers. The Mann-Whitney U-test shows that there are significant differences between the two genders in the evaluation of Christina Graf's ( $r = 0.313$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Claudia Neumann's ( $r = 0.373$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) performances, each with a medium effect.

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## 6 Conclusion and Outlook

In summary, it can be stated that just under one in five respondents recognize Claudia Neumann and can also name her. However, three quarters of the participants do not know either Christina Rann or Christina Graf. With regard to the characteristics of a female TV commentator, the participants believe that an understanding of the game and background knowledge are most important, while good looks are least important. However, a pleasant voice, the entertainment factor and good looks tend to be more important for male respondents than for female respondents. In terms of performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Christina Graf is rated best by the respondents with an average of 2.83 in the school grading system, while Claudia Neumann only receives an average grade of 3.38. In addition, male participants rated the performance of female TV commentators significantly worse overall than female participants. Claudia Neumann in particular, but also Christina Graf and Christina Rann, scored better among the female respondents in terms of performance evaluation.

As women are still an underrepresented species on the TV microphone, it is generally pleasing that all three broadcasting TV channels ARD, ZDF and MagentaTV each had a female commentator during the World Cup in Qatar. In view of the many other competent and experienced female sports journalists in Germany, it would be desirable to establish meaningful additions to the occasional female TV football commentators. After all, the more female commentators can be heard at the microphones in the future, the greater their acceptance by the TV audience will be in the long term.

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# Women as Football Commentators: Content Analysis of the Quality of Language in Live-TV Broadcasting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar

# 7

Michael Schaffrath and Bastian Daneyko

## 1 Introduction

“Because television broadcasts of the football matches involved in major competitions have a huge reach, we should consider live commentary as the high point of sports reporting” (Horky et al., 2018, p. 229). Women as commentators play “an important role” (Lee et al., 2016, pp. 146–147), because they have “a major influence on how the audience perceives a match... they influence the memory and evaluations of the audience” (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, pp. 631 & 634). We can go beyond these descriptive assessments and also empirically demonstrate the significance of live commentary for audiences. To this end, an experiment tested the influence of live commentary in football broadcasts. Out of 46 subjects questioned “more than 90 percent declared they considered the spoken accompaniment important” (Schaffrath, 2003, p. 91). In an online survey, out of 834 spectators two thirds said they “felt [the commentary] to be important or even very important” (Hendrischke, 2012, p. 40).

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The relevance allotted to the live commentary and the perception of importance both lead to it being not just the players who are being specially observed critically but also the women commentators, on the one hand by (print) journalist colleagues and on the other, by the audiences, and here especially by the football fans. Whilst criticism of male commentators has always been massive, that directed at the female ones proves more acerbic and much more drastic. The reason may be that, in this country, women have only been commenting live on football for a few years, so that many a football-traditionalist simply cannot come to terms with women commenting on football matches at all. In 2010, Claudia Neumann was the first woman to accompany a live match, thus writing a piece of television history. However, the USA v. Germany game was, equally, “only” a case of women’s football, as in the 2011 World Cup in her home country, where this ZDF television commentator was, at any rate, allowed to provide commentary on seven games in all. Male colleagues took over the two semi-final games, just like they did the final. A live match between men had a woman-commentator for the first time on February 3, 2013, in Christina Graf, who accompanied the second division game between Jahn Regensburg and Hertha BSC Berlin on the pay tv channel, Sky. It needed three more years until a woman was also permitted to comment on matches in a major international competition for men. At the 2016 EURO in France, Claudia Neumann provided the commentary on the Italy v. Sweden and the Wales v. Slovakia games. And at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, the ZDF journalist was assigned to the preliminary rounds, although to those not involving Germany, of course. A sequence of mainly male viewers reacted to a woman assigned as commentator with vehement verbal insults. Via Facebook or Twitter (today X), people posted the most pernicious tirades of hatred, mostly anonymously or under pseudonyms. The newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, rightly described the shit-storms on the net as “the most despicable, sexist and stupid filth” (Dörr, 2018).

Claudia Neumann once again provided commentary for the ZDF on live matches at the 2022 World Cup and she did not remain the sole woman commentator at the competition in Qatar. That is because each of the other two world Cup broadcasters assigned a woman. At ARD, it was Christina Graf, and Christina Rann at MagentaTV. Even if women providing commentary on live football in Qatar did remain an exception too, and they are still a minority in 2024, we can confirm that it has been a long while since women stood where you are not supposed to in football, namely (as commentators) offside.

On the one hand, the subjectively perceived importance of live tv commentaries, as well as, on the other, the social and medial significance of a football world cup makes the question about the quality of women commentators, or respectively, about the search for criteria denoting quality in live-commentaries, seem pertinent.

For decades, football has represented one of the greatest audience-magnets for television, something long-known and repeatedly demonstrated (see: Gerhard & Zubayr, 2014; Meier & Hagenah, 2016; Gerhard & Geese, 2016, Gerhard & Gscheidle, 2018). And so it is not surprising either that a football match achieved the highest ratings ever measured in Germany, and that was, in fact, the 2014 World Cup final between Germany and Argentina, with 34.57 million viewers. However, the top ratings in Qatar did not come close to that. The cause was the official criticism of the human rights situation at the venue, the kick-off and broadcast times being often unattractive, as well as—and this above all—the German team dropping out in the preliminary rounds. Nevertheless, certain games did achieve a distinctly high take-up, as, for example, the match between Germany and Costa Rica, with a rating of 17.4 million viewers and a market share of 53.7%, or the finale between France and Argentina with a rating of 13.86 million viewers and market share of 53.6%. It is no surprise that both these top-drawing matches had commentary from men, namely Gerd Gottlob, or respectively, Tom Bartels (both ARD). The games with commentary from the three women commentators at the World Cup had respectable viewer appeal, above all if you consider that almost all of them were games not involving top teams from Europe. The four games with commentary by Christina Graf for the ARD registered on average 2.78 million viewers, with an average market share of 23.35%. The five games Claudia Neumann accompanied were watched on ZDF by 3.72 million viewers on average, corresponding to a market share of 22.52% (see: [dwdl.de](http://dwdl.de)).<sup>1</sup> As MagentaTV did not publish any viewer figures for the World Cup, we cannot arrive at any reliable conclusion on the take-up of the five matches with commentary by Christina Rann.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The averages to which we are here referring are based on the actual daily gathering of quotas and market shares via the [dwdl.de](http://dwdl.de) media of all the matches broadcast by ARD and ZDF portal.

<sup>2</sup>In a press-notice at the end of the competition, the chief of Telekom's TV division said: "With four million MagentaTV customers, we have regularly reached seven figures of usage with our tv live-commentary. With matches exclusive to us, we even had a peak of more than 1.5 million viewers" (see Telekom, 2022). The statement does not, however, permit us to conclude anything about the spread of the matches Christina Rann commented on, but, at best, permits the speculation that it would certainly have been on average around a million viewers.

## 2 The Research Question and the Status of Research

This article investigates the central research question to this effect: at the 2022 World Cup, how high was the quality of language in commentaries by the three women live-commentators?

From an historical viewpoint, tv live-commentary should be considered in the context of linguistic research traditions. The topic of language in a sports context has been a subject of scholarly debate ever since the publication of Bues' "Versportung der deutschen Sprache im 20. Jahrhundert" [The Changes wrought by Sport on the German Language] as early as 1937. Among the most important studies dealing with language in football, there figure, in chronological order: Dankert (1969), Schneider (1974), Brandt (1983), Neugebauer (1986), Quentin (1989), Fingerhut (1991), Werneken (2000), Schütte (2006), Jung (2009), Barnfield (2013), Schaffrath (2019), and Horkey et al. (2019). Beyond that, a decidedly large number of national and international studies on commentary in sports use experiments or questionnaires to investigate either the effects of live-commentary on recipients or to set out what sports journalists require, as well as spectators' preferences as regards commentary on sports. These include, in chronological order: Bryant et al. (1977a, b, 1981, with Brown 1982), Danneboom (1988), Sullivan (1991), Ordmann and Zillmann (1994), Marr and Stiehler (1995), Stiehler and Marr (2001), Beentjes et al. (2002), Schaffrath (2003), Klimmt et al. (2006), Lang (2009), Baiocchi-Wagner and Behm-Morawitz (2010), Woo et al. (2010), Broch (2011), Hendrischke (2012), Kuiper and Lewis (2013), Watanabe et al. (2013), Zhou et al. (2013), Reichart Smith and Bissell (2014), English (2017), Lee et al. (2016), Vögele and Gözl (2016), Schwaiger (2022a, b), Kunert and Kuni (2023). We have taken the crucial results from these investigations into account in our search for the criteria of quality in language.

At first sight, this number of studies seems large but, nonetheless, live-commentary on sports has long counted as "a little-noticed phenomenon in communications research" (Klimmt et al., 2006, p. 172). Only a few years back, Vögele & Gözl (2016, p. 2) also concluded: "Studies relating to live-commentaries on sports events are, as a whole, rare in communications research into sports." These assessments are pertinent, if we look at the number of investigations analysing content in live-commentary. That is because these have been, indeed, very rarely conducted in the past 20 years, or respectively, published. In addition, the number of commentaries analysed, as may be, varies rather widely. Jung (2009) investigated 13 commentaries on matches on the occasion of the 2006 World Cup, Horkey et al. (2019) six commentaries on matches at the 2016 World Cup, Schaffrath

(2019) 12 commentaries at the 2016 EURO and Schaffrath (2021) a total of 30 commentaries on matches at the 2018 World Cup. Alongside their varying number, the investigations set different research emphases. Studies by Jung (2009) and Horky et al. (2019) concerned international comparisons, whilst Schaffrath (2019, 2021) looked exclusively at national commentaries on matches. The insights, as well as the experience, from these preceding analytical studies into content were extremely useful to this investigation into the quality of language displayed by women commentators at the World Cup in Qatar.

We are presenting our results on the quality of language here as part of a larger study on the 2022 World Cup, one taking an exclusive focus on women commentators when considering the research field of live-commentary on football. As we have analysed “only” selected aspects of language, this part of the study can claim, at best, to be no more than explorative.

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### 3 Definitive Categorisations and Functions

We have to understand live commentary on football broadcasts as a special journalistic form of presentation. We can, on the basis of various scholarly enquiries (see, for e.g., Dankert, 1969, p. 103; Quentin, 1989, p. 51; Berger, 2008, p. 137; Barnfield, 2013, p. 331; Vögele & Gözl, 2016, p. 2; Horky et al., 2019, pp. 2–5) perceive the smallest common denominator in understanding live commentary on football to be, as it were, the “verbal accompaniment” of matches happening in external reality and being visually observable. The practice in sports media describes this similarly (see for e.g., Seifart, 1996, p. 115; Scheu, 2007, pp. 246–247; Neumüller, 2007, pp. 34–35; Flügel, 2009, p. 212; Zimmer, 2016, p. 142). Tv live-commentary on football is regarded variously as a “mixed form” or as a “hybrid” from reportage (factual reporting) and commentary (from a subjective perspective) (see: Wiske, 2017, p. 26; Schaffrath, 2018, p. 55; Kunert & Kuni, 2023, pp. 631 & 634).

It is, at the least, misleading that tv commentaries were described as “original reporting” (Dankert, 1969, p. 105) or as “direct reporting” (Quentin, 1989, p. 51) and are, up to today, as a “special form of reporting” (Neufeld, 2004, p. 272) or as “live reporting on television” (Scheu, 2007, p. 246). The reason being that, with tv live-commentaries, it is less a matter of the central criteria of classical reporting, even if descriptive elements do surface in this stylistic form. However, owing to the imagery running in parallel and spectators’ opportunity to follow the match visually, it is not necessary to allow them to “share the experience” of the events “mentally and emotionally” via the “authentic narrative” (see Haller, 2006, p. 72), some-

thing essential with, for example, football reporting on radio. Here, just as in newspaper reports, verbalisations by “reporters” are meant to give rise to images in the heads of listeners, or respectively, readers. That is not necessary in television, as the images are already provided. In a commentary on tv, transferring classical elements of reporting would only lead to verbal duplication of what is already visible, that is, to permanent doubling up of imagery and text.

For that reason, live commentary on television should be understood, much rather, as a “specific form of commentary” (see: Schaffrath, 2019, p. 297). In commentaries, the “decided, explicit opinion” of “journalists is being sought” (see: Neuberger & Kapern, 2013, p. 53). It concerns the “organising, explaining and evaluation” of facts (see: Schalkowski, 2011, pp. 19–20), with the goal of “helping the audience to picture an event, a person or a development amid the flood of information” (Mast, 2004, p. 303). These are also important criteria in commentary on football in television. Live-commentary is more than just a “verbal repetition” (Zimmer, 2016, p. 142) or “verbal amplification” (Seifart, 1996, p. 115) of the imagery’s effect. Live-commentary involves verbal “augmentations” of the imagery, for example, through background information on players appearing in it or through information going beyond the imagery’s framing, such as, perhaps, the activities of coaches in their coaching-zone or on things happening in the stadium (see: Zimmer, 2016, p. 142; Kühnert, 2004, p. 42). Beyond that “explanations of the imagery and of what is happening in the match” are required (see: Vögele & Gözl, 2016, p. 2). Live-commentary has to explain to the audience “why the match is turning out as it is, why the referee has made this decision and not another” (Flügel, 2009, p. 213). Furthermore, it is a matter of “differentiating”, for example, playing tactics or the composition of teams. Commentators function “in the sense of the word ‘commentari’, as providers, explainers and interpreters” (Seifart, 1996, p. 115). He or she assesses matches, players, referees, as well as prevailing contexts (see: Vögele & Gözl, 2016, p. 2) and, if possible, in a well-informed manner (see: Neumüller, 2007, pp. 34–35). In addition, commentators have to be able to offer evaluations in conflict situations—as, for example, in cases of offside or penalties for handling or fouls—cogently and, in the best case, “quickly in seconds”, that is, even before slow motion replays. To sum up, what matters is this: “The commentator should meaningfully complement the TV image with their descriptions. This includes supporting the picture’s message with background information, explanations, their own opinion, the reproduction of the atmosphere as well as personal information about the players and well-dosed statistics, also within a carefully weaved [sic!] triad of chronicle, mimesis and plot” (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 632; Barnfield, 2013, p. 331). Live-commentary in television ought to be “a help in orientation when assessing and evaluating what happens in matches”

(Danneboom, 1988, p. 157), and, beyond that, it ought to motivate recipients' own criticism and participatory judgements (see: Seifart, 1996, p. 115).

We can use categorizations for definition to enable us to derive various functions of live-commentary in television. In this connection, various sources quite uniformly stipulate: "information, emotion, focusing, assessment and evaluation" (Horky et al., 2019, p. 2; see similarly also: Klimmt et al., 2006, pp. 171 & 187; Barnfield, 2013, p. 331; Zimmer, 2016, pp. 142–143; Kunert & Kuni, 2023, pp. 637–638). Alongside the classical journalistic functions of informing and evaluating, that of entertainment has rapidly gained relevance in the last few years (see: Lee et al., 2016). This also links back to sports reporting's increasing conversion into entertainment owing to the privatisation of the television landscape. Kunert and Kuni (2023) have been able to clearly demonstrate the resulting "tension" between the functions of information and of evaluation, on the one side and those of entertainment, on the other, by conducting their semi-structured interviews with 30 commentators involved in live broadcasts. We can assume the following: alongside journalistic aspects, "entertainment elements [have] their firm place in the quality criteria catalogue" (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 635.) Describing functions this way is accurate, but it remains vague or too general. We should, therefore, pose these practical questions on live-commentary in television: how much information needs to be specified? How many evaluations should be undertaken? How much entertainment is desirable? There is no conclusive answer possible by dint of the dynamics and dramatic structure of each match. "It should be noted that the commentary for a soccer match varies depending on the team pairing and the competition" (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 641).

All the same, in shared criteria we can identify aspects, which we should include in judging the quality of live-commentary in television. Extensive professional competence and a highly-developed capacity for communication are fundamentally necessary. In what follows, we will describe the linguistic criteria capable of denoting quality in practical terms.

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## 4 Criteria of Quality in Language-Use

"Wanting to define quality in journalism is like attempting to nail a pudding to the wall" (Ruß-Mohl, 1992, p. 83). This metaphorical bonmot also applies to the practical question as to the quality of live television commentary on football. The fundamental problem lies in the fact that quality is not something objective and immutably established but is always something relative, that we have to consider from the perspective of various parties (see: Neuberger & Kapern, 2013, p. 127). Quality

is an “observational construct” determined by subjective judgements by various systems and parties (see: Bucher, 2003, pp. 12–14), as, for example, “by the media, by genre, the rhythms of audience attention, by target groups and (...) by the concepts and by the demands editors as well as individual staff apply to themselves.” (Ruß-Mohl, 1992, p. 374). Arnold suggests understanding quality as “the degree, to which a product has to conform to certain requirements” (Arnold, 2008, p. 491; Arnold, 2016, p. 552). The practical question would ask which requirements from which parties live-television commentary on football involves, given that the original dilemma indicates that the subjective stances of various parties can lead to diverging or even conflicting requirements. The reason being, as the few surveys show, that neither sports journalists nor spectators agree on what does all belong to “good” football commentary in television. All the same, we can identify a few overarching aspects, which investigations by scholars and the practice of sports journalism do, by and large, accept.

According to Arnold (2013, p. 82), “empirically measuring quality [can] proceed in two ways: on the one hand, criteria of quality can be developed on a theoretical basis and applied to particular offerings. (...) On the other, we can proceed openly. Doing this means asking recipients (or also producers) what are their expectations of quality.”

A “theoretically based” derivation of criteria for quality in live-television commentary on football proves problematical (on this, see: Schaffrath, 2019, pp. 298–300), so we are here pursuing the second “open” option Arnold suggests, namely examining surveys of journalists and of audiences as regards their requirements concerning quality (see: Arnold, 2013, p. 82). With such surveys, we can at least find out which criteria for quality are considered important, or not, from the viewpoint of communicators and recipients (see: Arnold, 2008, p. 503). However, only five surveys on live-television commentary on football exist to date. Lang (2009) and Kunert and Kuni (2023) sampled journalists’ expectations. Lang (2009) surveyed 11 print journalists and 43 television commentators on football online. Using semi-structured telephone interviews, Kunert and Kuni (2023) surveyed 28 television commentators on football, 1 radio commentator on football and 1 expert on football. Klimmt et al. (2006), Hendrichske (2012) and Schwaiger (2022b) investigated audiences’ preferences. All three studies applied the method of online-surveying, where Klimmt et al. (2006) included 6543 sports enthusiasts in their sample, whilst Hendrichske (2012) had 843 football fans and Schwaiger (2022b) 171 people interested in football. The following attempt to identify overarching linguistic criteria for quality incorporates three foundations:

Firstly, what sports journalists expect, as set out by Lang (2009) and Kunert and Kuni (2023), and the preference of audiences, as surveyed by Klimmt et al. (2006) und Hendrichske (2012),<sup>3</sup> as well as Schwaiger (2022); secondly, various preceding studies on the topic of the language of sports, or respectively, football (for example, Dankert, 1969; Quentin, 1989; Fingerhut, 1991; Berger, 2008; Jung, 2009; Horky et al., 2019, Schaffrath, 2021) and thirdly, certain “best practice” publications (for example, Seifart, 1996; Scheu, 2007; Flügel, 2009; Zimmer, 2016).

With all these sources as a basis, we identified overall the following linguistic criteria of quality and will now elaborate on them.

## 4.1 Skill in Talking

Skill in talking is often equated with “rhetorical competence”, “rhetorical strengths”, “eloquence” or also “a good choice of words” (see: Kunert & Kuni, 2023, pp. 635 & 639, as well as Wiske, 2017, p. 127). Being able to talk well is an indispensable precondition for good live-television commentary on football. Lang’s survey used a six-point scale, from 1 = “very important” to 6 = “decidedly unimportant”, to pose the statement, “Commentators should be able to talk well”. With television commentators, the average was 1.8, and with newspaper editors even 1.4 (see: Lang, 2009, p. 84). The same thing applied to viewers. The football fans Hendrichske surveyed via a four-point scale, from 1 = “very important” to 4 = “not important at all”, equally placed the ability to talk very high up, with an average of 1.64 (see: Hendrichske, 2012, p. 51).

However, what does a good ability to talk mean in practical terms, or respectively, how does it manifest itself? With live-television commentary on football, one of the greatest demands comprises, “to translate the immediacy of sport into immediate language” (Bözl, 2018, p. 175). Or, to put it another way: “The commentator must be able (...) to transfer his or her sensory impressions into words”

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<sup>3</sup>In his questionnaire, Hendrichske has taken over a series of questions and stipulated items in answers from Lang, so that comparisons of the expectations regarding quality by journalist and recipients are certainly possible, but only tendentially, because Lang has consistently worked with a six-step scale and Hendrichske with a four-step one. In addition, the positive, or respectively, the negative directions of the assessment are often precisely reversed. The differing opinions on the criterion of language could derive from the diverging age-structure of the two samples. With Lang, only a total of 4% of those questioned were younger than 30 (see: 2009, pp. 56–57); with Hendrichske, 85% in total belonged to this age-group (see: 2012, p. 47).

(Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 635). Commentators have, therefore, to be able to translate sensory perceptions into the abstraction of phonetic signs, based on their individual ability to talk (see: Berger, 2008, p. 139). By dint of the unpredictability of events in a match and because of the very rapid train of events, “there remains very little space for gathering your thoughts on what you want to say” (Berger, 2008, p. 139). This challenging “feat of translation” can lead to a series of problems militating against any great ability in talking. We will briefly describe three aspects and then test them empirically—they, in fact, are “filler words/verbal hesitations”, “verbal mistakes”, as well as “mistakes in grammar and syntax”.

*Filler words/vocalised hesitations*: the mostly single-syllable filler words, or respectively, the verbal hesitations (mostly, “er” or “um”) serve not only in spoken language but also in live-television commentary on football to bridge breaks in speaking between two words or units of speech. These are often used without noticing if time is needed to articulate your intended notion. Sports journalists, and their public find these filler words, or respectively, vocalized hesitations, somewhat “annoying”. On a six-point scale from 1 = “I don’t find that annoying at all” to 6 = “I find that very annoying”, the average value with television commentators stands at 4.1, and with newspaper editors at 3.7 (see: Lang, 2009, p. 73). With the audience survey, applying a reversed four-step scale from 1 = “really annoying” to 4 = “not annoying”, the average stands at 2.34 (see: Hendrichske, 2012, p. 49).

*Verbal Mistakes*: Neither sports journalists nor recipients find what we describe as involuntary and unintended errors “particularly annoying”. On a six-step scale from 1 = “not annoying at all” to 6 = “really annoying”, the average for television commentators stands at 2.4 and for press colleagues at 3.1 (see: Lang, 2009, p. 73). Football fans voting on a reversed four-step scale, where 1 = “really annoying” and 4 = “not annoying”, produces an average of 3.05, showing that the audience also finds verbal mistakes scarcely annoying (see: Hendrichske, 2012, p. 49). Such surveys, however, never practically register what number of verbal errors makes this stated tolerance begin declining and, if it actually does, what number of verbal mistakes are annoying or even really annoying.

*Mistakes in Grammar and Syntax*: Mistakes in grammar, or respectively, in sentence structure should not happen at all with professional live-television commentators on football, but repeatedly do, all the same. The surveys cited do not investigate how seriously people view such deficits. Neither Lang (2009) nor Kunert and Kuni (2023), nor Klimmt et al. (2006), Hendrichske (2012) or Schwaiger (2022b) have questioned audiences about this. It does, however, seem plausible that a large number of mistakes in grammar or syntax may certainly not denote any high quality of language in a live-television commentary.

## 4.2 Verbal Forms of Emotionality

Alongside informational and football-specific stipulations, in their survey of audiences Klimmt et al. (2006) also identify emotional aspects viewers may perceive as important requirements for quality in live-commentaries. Items like, for example, commentators needing to be “in the spirit” or “highly emotional”, gained relatively high scores in the analysis of factors, as performed (see: 2006, p. 179). Hendrischke’s survey of football fans produced a similar scenario. On a four-step scale from 1 = “very important” to 4 = “not important at all”, the item, “live-television commentators on football should show euphoria”, received a decidedly high average, with a 1.57 (see: Hendrischke, 2012, p. 51).

Emotionality can be expressed through various verbal means. Varying your voice, changing its volume, talking more quickly, as well as intonation and pronunciation, all these belong here (see: Jung, 2009, p. 151; Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 639). Basically, talking more quickly and loudly in live-television commentaries stresses the drama inherent in exciting passages of play, like scoring-chances and goals (see: Jung, 2009, p. 151). Drawing out sounds, as happens particularly in football when shouting out “goooooal”, is a “very typical stylistic device in live commentaries on sport” (Jung, 2009, p. 151). This study investigates “interjections”, “superlatives” and “exhortative prefixes” as verbal expressions of emotionality.

*Interjections:* Interjections point to speakers’ feelings (see: Fries, 2000, pp. 101–102), and live-television commentary on football often includes them at exciting scenarios in matches. Goals, penalties, fouls, as well as yellow and red cards are events typical of football, which call up emotions and are also emphasised verbally in live-commentary by interjections, like, for example, “oh”, “ah”, “wooh”, “woahwoahwoah” etc. (see: Jung, 2009, p. 150). Unfortunately, we do not find any indications at all, in the various surveys of sports journalists and viewers relating to the question, as to whether people do at all—and how often—consider interjections as important or not important and feel they are annoying or not.

*Superlatives:* Using superlatives is a central element of hyperbolic forms of expression already classified 50 years ago in empirical analyses of language as “a noticeable characteristic” or as “decisive factors” for sports reporting in general (see: Dankert, 1969, p. 66). More recent studies on the language of sports even describe exaggeration as the “most important structuring element” in live-television commentary on football (see: Jung, 2009, p. 151). “Sports reporters try to convey atmosphere and euphoria through an exaggerated style of speaking in commentaries. This renders the reporting more vivid.” (Jung, 2009, p. 151). The “coquetry

with superlatives” makes the language of sports very similar to that of advertising (see: Fingerhut, 1991, p. 89). To date, there are no empirical data as to how journalists and audiences assess this.

*Exhortative Prefixes:* Exhortative prefixes, that is, prefixes denoting forms of augmentation intended to reinforce the meaning of words, are expressions of emotionality, helping to increase audiences’ attentiveness (see: Jung, 2009, p. 155). For their own part, the studies available to date do not, however, offer, any practical results indicating how journalists and audiences perceive the use of exhortative prefixes.

The list of the criteria presented here as denoting quality in language-use does not claim completeness. We could equally include further aspects, as, for example, the “use of the demotic”, the “creation of neologisms”, the “use of anglicisms” or also the “false pronunciation of players’ names”. This study does not, however, investigate these more closely, for two reasons: firstly, there exist distinctly contradictory assessments by sports journalists and audiences of their acceptance (see: Lang, 2009, pp. 70–71; Hendrischke, 2012, p. 48), and secondly, methodological reasons, above all, also militate against that. There are problems of lacking precision and also the difficulty that, at international competitions, we cannot seriously assess if the names of players are pronounced rightly or wrongly.

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## 5 The Design of the Investigation

For the study on the Football World Cup in Qatar, we used content analysis<sup>4</sup> as our method for testing the criteria for quality in language-use. As this research project concerns women as commentators exclusively, we accordingly analysed their World Cup commentaries. Christina Graf (ARD), Claudia Neumann (ZDF) and Christina Rann (MagentaTV) did the commentary for 14 matches altogether (Table 7.1).

To carry out the analysis of content, the 14 commentaries on matches had to be completely transcribed. This functioned on the basis of recordings of the live-broadcasts, or respectively, on the basis of the broadcasts archived in appropriate

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<sup>4</sup>“The analysis of content is an empirical method for a systematic and intersubjectively replicable description of characteristics of content and form, mostly with the goal of using it to support the establishment of an inference as to elements external to the communication” (Früh, 2017, p. 29). We have to refrain from further exegeses on the method of content analysis for reasons of complexity (see on this: Früh, 2017; Brosius et al., 2016, pp. 137–182).

**Table 7.1** The Objects of the Investigation

Channel	Commentator	Match	Result
ARD	Christina Graf	Morocco—Croatia	0:0
ARD	Christina Graf	Netherlands—Ecuador	1:1
ARD	Christina Graf	South Korea—Ghana	2:3
ARD	Christina Graf	Croatia—Belgium	0:0
ZDF	Claudia Neumann	USA—Wales	1:1
ZDF	Claudia Neumann	Mexiko—Poland	0:0
ZDF	Claudia Neumann	Japan—Costa Rica	0:1
ZDF	Claudia Neumann	Tunesia—France	1:0
ZDF	Claudia Neumann	Japan—Croatia	1:1 (1:3p. shootout)
Magenta TV	Christina Rann	Denmark—Tunesia	0:0
Magenta TV	Christina Rann	Uruguay—South Korea	0:0
Magenta TV	Christina Rann	Poland—Saudi Arabia	2:0
Magenta TV	Christina Rann	Netherlands—Qatar	2:0
Magenta TV	Christina Rann	Japan—Croatia	1:1 (1:3p. shootout)

mediatheques. Producing transcripts<sup>5</sup> represented a really time-consuming phase of our work, needing 170 hours in total. The transcript collection<sup>6</sup> contained 370 sides of A4. The written language made the analysis of content easier, as reading a text allows quicker identification of variables in comparison to listening to a spoken version. Nevertheless, it was also, in some cases, necessary to partially view, or listen to several sequences of play more than once. We initially formed categories deductively, on the basis of the surveys described, as well as of the existing studies on the language of sports and of individual “best-practice” publications. After we had gone through the transcripts, we added further categories inductively; for the assessment we present here, we identified 19 variables, 11 formal ones and eight spoken.<sup>7</sup> For all matches, all assessments refer to the period from the kick off of

<sup>5</sup>The transcription follows relevant guidelines for transcription for sports reporting (see: Neugebauer, 1986). Every commentary was transcribed word-for-word. With this, we covered errors in pronunciation, interjections, vocalised hesitations, as well as dialect variants, errors in grammar, as well as faulty sentence structure. Three student assistants took on the transcriptions. Each student transcribed five, or respectively, four matches. Subsequently, we compared all transcripts with the original commentaries once again to check them.

<sup>6</sup>The transcription collection for the matches, as well as the code book, are available from the authors.

<sup>7</sup>The formal variables were “name of commentator”, “channel”, date of broadcast”, “match between”, “match result”, “number of goals”, number of scoring chances”, “number of fouls/handballs”, “number of yellow”, “yellow-red” and “red cards”, “duration of broadcast after kick off”, “viewing quota for match”. The variables in language ran “number of words in

the 1<sup>st</sup> half, as well as that of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, up to the final whistle of each match, including any extra time.<sup>89</sup>

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## 6 Results

### 6.1 Skill in Talking

Using three criteria, we will attempt to specify the skill in talking, as wielded by the individual commentators, by relating it to our theoretical grounding.

#### 6.1.1 Filler Words/Vocalised Hesitancies

As set out above, filler word, or respectively, vocalised hesitancies<sup>10</sup> figure as “rather annoying” from both the viewpoint of journalists (see: Lang, 2009, p. 73) and from that of audiences (see: Hendrischke, 2012, p. 59). Our assessment of this shows, once again, noticeable differences between the commentators, and, in fact,

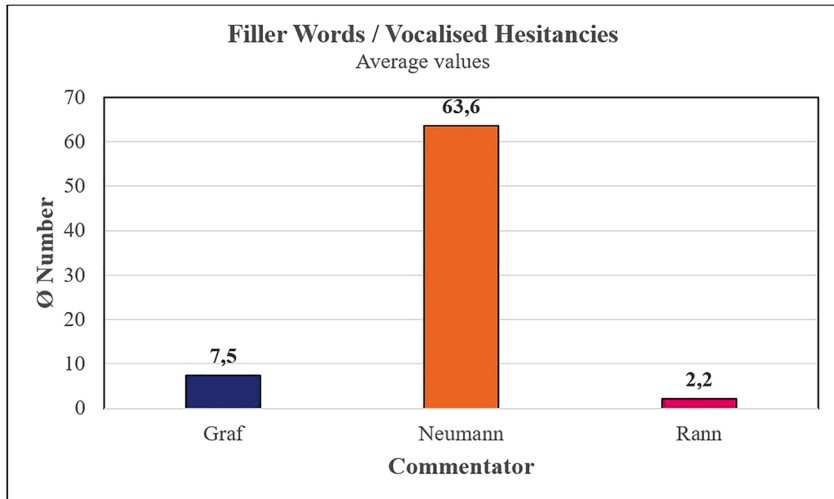
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commentary”, “duration of commentary”, “filler words”, “errors in talking”, “errors in grammar/faulty syntax”, “interjections”, “superlatives” and “exhortative prefixes”. We determined the absolute intensity of commentaries via the word-count displayed in Word. In order to fix the relative duration of talking, in each case this was measured initially with stop-watches by two assistants independently of each other. With each match, the differences lay under a minute, which is why we can assume we can depend on the measurement of duration of talking. Two student assistants carried out the coding for “interjections” and “filler words”. Holsti’s inter code reliability coefficient gave for “errors in talking” (0.93), for “errors in grammar” (0.86), for “superlatives” (0.95) and for “exhortative prefixes” (0.96). Brosius et al. are “satisfied with a quotient of 0.7” for categories of content (2016, p. 56) and deem a value of 0.8 as “acceptable” (2016, p. 162). The values gained here lay between 0.86 and 1.00, so that we can assume they are reliable measurements.

<sup>8</sup>Only one match, namely Japan v. Croatia, which was broadcast simultaneously by both the ZDF and MagentaTV, went into extra time and the penalty shootout. To ensure this match remained comparable to other broadcasts, we attributed only the regular playing time to this game in our analyses. We did not assess the commentaries on the extra time and the penalty shootout.

<sup>9</sup>With six of the 14 broadcasts, experts were introduced as co-commentators, namely by the ARD for Croatia v. Belgium, by the ZDF for Mexico v. Poland, Tunisia v. France and Japan v. Croatia, as well as by MagentaTV for Denmark v. Tunisia and Japan v. Croatia. These co-commentaries did not form part of this investigation and were thus not considered. The same went for the few seconds of switching to an expert on refereeing, as happened in five of the 14 matches.

<sup>10</sup>The code book defines filler words/ verbal hesitancies as the mostly single-syllable sounds introduced into the spoken language to bridge pauses, above all “äh” and “ähm”.



**Fig. 7.1** Filler Words/Vocalised Hesitancies

on a spectrum reaching from nil filler words, as with Rann on Netherlands v. Qatar, up to 96 filler words with Neumann on Japan v. Costa Rica. Comparing averages demonstrates how Neumann needed “äh” and “ähm” just on 64 times per match for bridging pauses in talking, whilst Graf had to reach for this “stylistic device” just on eight times, And Rann only twice (Fig. 7.1). The differences are, then, really quite large and, on this criterion, do indicate a noticeable difference in quality between the commentators.

### 6.1.2 Errors in Talking

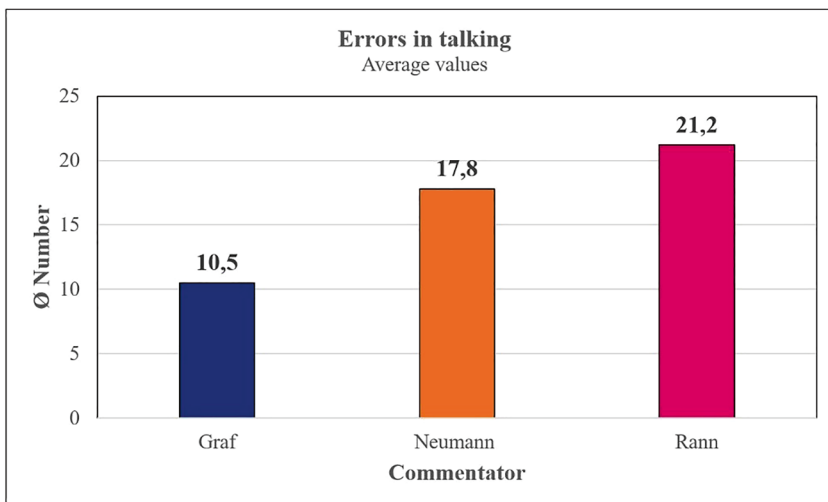
Errors in talking<sup>11</sup> count with journalists (see: Lang, 2009, p. 73) and with audiences (see: Hendrichske, 2012, p. 49) as actually “annoying” but not “very annoying”. Many “best practice” publications even describe errors in talking as “all-too-

<sup>11</sup>The codebook deems errors in talking as: the wrong words or those wrongly pronounced (for example: Mohamed, sorry, Homam Ahmed, Cron Contreras), truncated words (for example: “ex- go, goalkeeper”), errors in talking with facts or statistics (for example: “He scored against Saudi-Arabia Argentina”), as well as repeating words (for example: “Is that a good idea with with Tunisia?”, “often attacking, attacking underway”). In addition, saying something wrong and directly correcting it (for example: “The foul by Depay, or on Depay”, “Referees from USA, the USA”) or also stuttering over words (for example: “possibab, ble”).

human”, which is why several practitioners even deem them “not a criterion in making any qualification” (see: Scheu, 2007, p. 273). By contrast, however, we surmise here that the subjective “feeling of annoyance”, given a large number of errors in talking, is also large. A large number of errors in talking is should certainly not indicate any rhetorical brilliance. All the commentators evince errors in talking, and, in fact, to varying degrees. (Fig. 7.2).

The spectrum lies between 8 errors by Graf on South Korea v. Ghana and 26 by Neumann on Tunesia v. France. Comparing averages shows that Rann makes the most errors, and that around 21 times per match, in front of Neumann’s 18 times per event and Graf’s 10 times per game. This indicates that the commentators we are here analysing in comparison make errors as often as the commentators observed in earlier investigations (see: Schaffrath, 2019, p. 309).

A brief selection of various original utterances should illustrate the spectrum of errors. Errors with player’s names appear a lot, something not particularly surprising, given an international competition. What is more, the commentators often correct these immediately, as, for example, “*Era, Ivan Perisic*”, “*Lo, that was Modric*” (Neumann); “*Ismail Elfta Elfath*”, “*Abudlelah Al-Amri, Alm, Moment, Moment, Al-Amri*” (Rann). There are also quickly-corrected errors with verbs, adjectives and nouns, as, for example: „*Der schnell nervövös wird*“, „*Alle rund um den Strafraumpunkt, Elfmeterpunkt versammelt*“(Graf); „*Das erste, die erste*



**Fig. 7.2** Errors in Talking

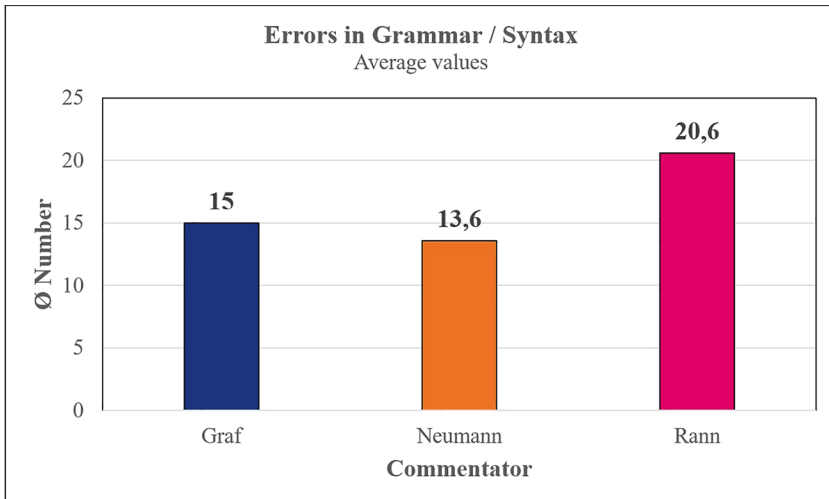
*Verlängerung dieses Turniers“*, „*Leistet sich hier ein ums andere Mal ne dicke Papapassstafette“*, „*Also, Joe Rodon erwartet natürlich, dass man ihm entgegenkommt, dass man ihm Anstilt Spiel Sp Stationen bietet*, „*Der ganz sicher aufmunder, aufmunterenden Charakter hatte“* (Neumann); „*Der Torschüsse, schütze“*, „*Weil Itakura gepie, gesperrt“*, „*Kurze Be, kurze Bewegung“*, „*Jetzt bekommt er den Freistoß. Na klar, ist Uruguay damit, Verzeihung, Südkorea damit nicht einverstanden“* (Rann).

In the context of errors, some misleading and incomprehensible word- and sentence constructions stand out, like, for example, „*Vor allen Dingen natürlich die Pfiffe auf kroatischer Seite sind knapp, aber richtig“* (Graf), „*Und einer derer Matschen hier schafften hier aus dieser Gruppe F“* (Graf) „*Angelegt, der Ball und dann vor dem Körper* (Graf). What was meant here, was probably the “arm”; „*... als äh dreizehntes und letztes europäisches Turnier Tüt äh Mannschaft erst für dieses Turnier qualifiziert“* (Neumann); „*De Jong zeigt an, dass, ich weiß nicht, selbst im Trainingsspiel würd ich sagen: Jungs bewegt Euch mal“*. „*Doan, der Joker von heute, von Beginn an“* (Rann). Is the player named now the “joker” or has he been playing “right from the start”?

### 6.1.3 Errors in Grammar and in Syntax

We could often also allot errors in grammar and in syntax<sup>12</sup> to the category of errors in talking, because we can assume that commentators do not incur these consciously but much rather by mistake. Although we cannot find dependable assessments on this topic in the preceding surveys, either from the journalists’ or the audiences’ viewpoints, we think, all the same, it makes sense to investigate these when analysing the quality of language used. The spectrum runs from the eight errors by Neumann on Japan v. Croatia up to the 28 errors by Rann on Denmark v. Tunisia. Comparison of averages shows that Rann incurred just on 21 errors in grammar and syntax per match, Graf (ARD) just on 15 and Neumann some 14 (Fig. 7.3). Even if we must consider that commentators have to talk without any support for more than 90 min, that is, without a manuscript or a teleprompter—doubtless, a demanding task—the number of such errors per match does, neverthe-

<sup>12</sup>The code book assesses errors in grammar and in syntax as: a false grammatical case (for example: “one need a bit of time”), switching singular and plural (for example: “Once again extra, one, two players runs up”), false tense (for example: “Dembele convinces the trainer in the preparation”) or the wrong sentence structure (for example: “How was often the ball played under pressure”). In this category, we *did not include* sentences with no subject or predicate, if such truncations were deliberately meant to increase the excitement. That is, formulations like, for example, “Mean by that”, “Believe, he falls down too easily”, were *not* assessed as errors in grammar.



**Fig. 7.3** Errors in Grammar and in Syntax

less, seem borderline. In comparison to the male commentators analysed in a preceding study, woman as commentators incur, on average, twice as many errors of this sort. With the three currently investigated commentators, there are, on average, 16.5 errors in grammar and syntax, as compared to five male commentators investigated earlier (see: Schaffrath, 2019, p. 310). Whether we can reinforce this conclusion is something we have to look at in further studies.

Going beyond the numerical values, a small selection of quotations exemplifies some of these doubtful expressions: “Und lassen Kroatien einfach in ihrer eigenen Hälfte den Ball laufen“, „Stimmung ist deutlich besser geworden (...). Nicht, dass er vorm Anpfiff schlecht war“ (Graf); „Amerikaner werden sich den Vorwurf gefallen lassen müssen, in der zweiten Halbzeit einen Tick abreißen haben lassen“, „Ist extra nochmal, ein, zwei Spieler hingerannt“, „... bekommt jetzt auch gleich die Kommentar des Kapitäns zu dieser Aktion“ (Neumann); „Bentancur mit gute Flanke“, „Hat heute `nen ganz guten auf der Platz“, „Jetzt sind sie heiß gelaufen, die polnische Nationalmannschaft“, „Das ist `ne ehemaligen und aktuellen Bundesliga-Kombination“ (Rann).

## 6.2 Verbal Forms for Expressing Emotionality

The attempt is made to establish the degree of emotionality by using three elements of language.

### 6.2.1 Interjections

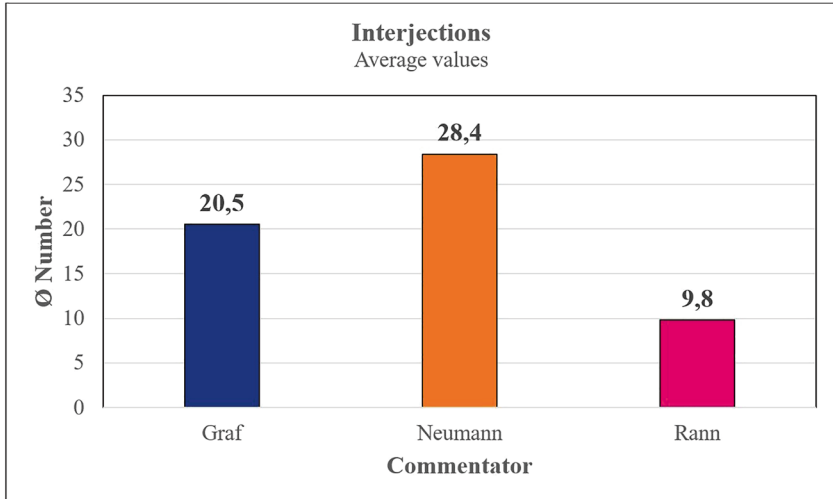
Interjections<sup>13</sup> also belong to the criteria for language, which indicate a speaker's feelings (see Fries, 2000, p. 101) and can be an expression of the emotionality audiences want (see: Klimmt et al., 2006, p. 178). They also represent an element of everyday language audiences enjoy, as Hendrischke's study indicates (see: 2012, p. 47). However, we have to consider an inflated use of interjections as counter-productive. They seem to crop up most readily with goals or with scoring chances, as, for example, "*Boah, Klasse, Klasse Aktion vom Torhüter der Marokkaner*", "*Oah, da fehlte schon nicht so viel*" (Graf); "*Ah, stark gemacht von Robinson*", "*Oah, risikoreich dort geklärt*" (Neumann) oder "*Oah. Knapp hinterm Törchen schlug sie ein*", "*Huiuuui. Gassama schaut sich's an*" (Rann). How often interjections are used varies with the commentators. The spectrum runs from six interjections by Rann on Poland v. Saudi Arabia up to 37 interjections from Neumann on Japan v. Croatia. On average, Neumann uses around 29 interjections, in front of Graf with just on 21, and Rann not even 10 (Fig. 7.4).

### 6.2.2 Superlatives

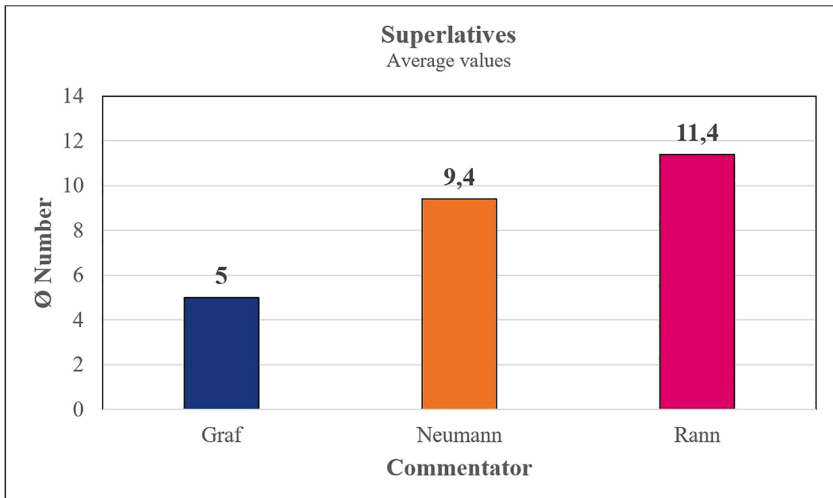
Earlier analyses on language-use with sports has shown that hyperbolic expressions belong to the stock-in-trade of reporting on football (see Dankert, 1969, pp. 65–81; Fingerhut, 1991, pp. 89–92; Jung, 2009, pp. 155–156). This study demonstrates how that still holds good today and how superlatives<sup>14</sup> appear in (almost) every live-television commentary, where, once again, we cannot definite differences according to commentator. The spectrum runs from nil by Graf on the South Korea v. Ghana game up to 19 by Rann on the Poland v. Saudi Arabia match. Comparing the averages shows that Rann has the highest use of superlatives, with a total of 12 times. Neumann (ZDF) follows with just on ten and Graf (ARD) with five superlatives on average (Fig. 7.5).

<sup>13</sup>The code book defines interjections as syntactically often isolated, vocalisations resembling words and expressing feelings, as, for example, "hmmm", "oh", "ah", "woohoo", "eyeyey", "woah" etc.

<sup>14</sup>The code book defines a superlative as a concept's highest form of intensification, as, for example, "most dangerously"; "the greatest participant"; "the best scoring chance"; "the most noticeable player". We covered all of the superlatives.



**Fig. 7.4** Interjections



**Fig. 7.5** Superlatives

With the superlatives, expressions with “best” are most common, as, for example, “best player”, “best move”, “best possibility”. Not so common, but still to be heard repeatedly, are the combinations with “greatest”, like “greatest chance”, “greatest problems”, “greatest technical skill” etc.

### 6.2.3 Exhortative Prefixes

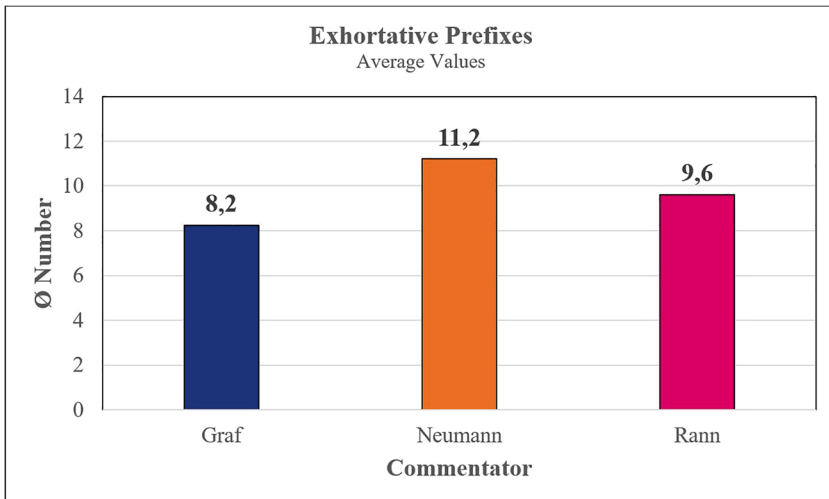
Exhortative prefixes figure among the stylistic devices in language for reinforcing emotions. Classical examples, such as “*baumlang*”, “*tieftraurig*”, “*stinknormal*” or “*knallhart*” [literally translated as listed: “tree tall”, “deeply sorrowful”, “stinkingly normal” or “bang-up hard” could scarcely be registered in this study. “*Jetzt hauchzart*”; “*und dann verteidigen sie das blitzgescheit*” (Neumann); “*Saudi-Arabien ist brandgefährlich*” (Rann).

Exhortative prefixes<sup>15</sup> also appear in connection with “high”, as, for example, “*hochverdient*”, “*hochkarätig*”, “*hochspannend*” (*highly deserved, high-carat, highly exciting*). In addition, the aggrandising morphemes that advertising language readily and frequently applies, like “giant”, “peak” or “top” (see: Fingerhut, 1991, p. 89), stood out in this study. „*Riesengroße Unterbrechungen*“ (Graf); „*Riesengelegenheit hier von Ben Davies und ein Hauch später dieser Kopfball*“, „*Und auch ein äh Top Top Top Stürmer darf mal en Elfer verschießen*“ (Neumann). The spectrum spans five prefixes from Graf on South Korea v. Ghana up to 13 from Neumann on Japan v. Costa Rica. However, here the differences between the three commentators turn out to be minor. With 11 prefixes Neumann is slightly ahead of Rann, with 10 altogether and Graf with eight in all (Fig. 7.6).

## 7 Conclusion

Overall, we can declare that, basically, all three commentators at the 2022 Qatar World Cup thoroughly fulfilled the functions of live-television commentary on football, as adduced from the literature and the preceding studies, even though this does turn out differently according to commentator where it relates to the aspects of “Skill in Talking” and “Expressive Forms for Emotionality”. The study reveals

<sup>15</sup>In the code book, an augmentative form designated by a prefix is defined as an “exhortative prefix”, by means of which the meaning of a word is to be reinforced. In this study we included, on the one hand, adjectival forms, such as, for example, “firedangerous”, “breathsoft”, “highly deserved”, “lightningfast”, “deeply sad” etc. Beyond that, exhortatives using nouns were counted, for example, with the prefixes, “giant”, “world-class” or “top”, so, for example, “giant possibility”, “world-class goal-keeper”, “top chance”.



**Fig. 7.6** Exhortative Prefixes

various strengths and weaknesses in the three commentators. The decidedly high number of “errors in talking”, as well as “errors in grammar and syntax” warrant a critical eye. As we set it out in our theoretical section, one of the greatest demands on live-commentator’s language consists in rendering all the visual impressions directly into words. That requires a “great spontaneity” and a “great talent for improvising” (see: Jung, 2009, p. 146). For that reason, “errors in talking” and “errors in grammar and syntax” probably cannot be avoided completely. However, the number here arrived at and the already sparse examples cited to explain these sorts of deficits could, or should, motivate all three commentators to reflect, at least, on their own skill in talking and, as the case may be, to improve it, even via appropriate training in talking.

One fundamental problem of researching into quality, which also materialised in this study, consists in arguably objectifiable criteria for quality not, by a long chalk, aligning with subjective benchmarks in assessment. Bucher (2003, pp. 12–14) rightly points out that, even if standards were to align, varying judgments might be conceivable. And this study also confirms: “There is no perfect commentary” (Flügel, 2009, p. 212), something caused by the following: “Commentary of a soccer match that is broadcast live on television is a complicated process” (Barnfield, 2013, p. 331).

## 8 Limitations

Despite the considerable effort involved in it, the study, we present here, examining 14 live-commentaries as well as focussing on selected criteria of quality, can only qualify as explorative in nature. This involves limitations scarcely permitting any interpretations applicable generally. The operationalisations we developed have proved effective in testing selected aspects of the quality of language used in live-television commentary on football. Our investigation provides pointers to deficits, which should be once again assessed in future analyses. Going beyond that, other aspects we do not investigate here, such as “metaphors”, “phrases”, “platitudes” or “neologisms” could provide further insights into the level of language used by commentators in television. Further research projects should also consider directly comparing women commentators on live-television and their male counterparts in the context of a particular competition.

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# From Minute-by-Minute Reporting to Critical Analysis: The Role of German Live Ticker Apps During the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar

Robert Bauguitte, Daniel Nölleke, and Inga Oelrichs

## 1 Introduction

When Gonzalo Montiel converted the final penalty for his Argentina team against France in the final of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, online devices around the globe exploded with the news. People all over the world witnessed this roller-coaster ride, at the end of which Argentina and its superstar Lionel Messi finally succeeded in winning the most important trophy in international football. By its very name, the live ticker was the obvious media format to convey this news and all the highlights during the match. More than two decades ago, media outlets embraced the live ticker to deliver news on current affairs in real time (Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), with sporting events being one of the main areas of application (Siehr, 2016). For a long time, such formats were therefore typical of the event-driven focus in sports journalism and its traditional “stick to sports” approach (Broussard, 2020), which largely neglects more critical socio-political aspects of sporting events. However, in the digital media landscape, it has become increasingly questionable whether such an approach is an appropriate strategy to maintain status as a primary source of sports-related information (Perreault & Nölleke, 2022).

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Research has shown that the authority of established sports media is under threat as fans and, more importantly, sports actors themselves can share information directly with their peers (McEnnis, 2020). Such first-hand information is potentially more authentic, competent and even up-to-date. With regard to the concept of boundary work (Carlson, 2015), there has been discussion for some time about how established sports media react in order to (re)claim legitimacy and thus secure traditional privileges such as access to sporting events and the trust of the audience (Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke, 2023). In this context, it seems promising to (1) embrace technological innovation (Pavlik, 2021) and to (2) protect the autonomy of sports journalism by strengthening the analytical and critical approach to sports events and results (Sadri et al., 2022). In this study, we pay particular attention to the latter aspect, although we are focusing on a constantly evolving format that can justifiably be regarded as a technological innovation in itself.

Against the backdrop of an increasingly contested legitimacy of sports journalism, we examine the use of the live ticker format as a tool for covering a mega sporting event, namely the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Live tickers have evolved tremendously since their launch and can now potentially integrate highly innovative elements such as visual storytelling, interfaces to social media platforms that enable and enhance user interaction, and artificial intelligence (Broussard et al., 2019; Smulczyński, 2019). Despite their long history, they can therefore still be seen as features of innovative sports reporting and serve as tools to differentiate the various approaches of sport media outlets. However, they are usually characterized precisely by their event-driven focus, which is often dismissed as inferior compared to the offerings of sports actors themselves. The question therefore arises as to the extent to which sports media still predominantly use the live ticker format as an instrument for reporting on the key moments of matches in real time. This question is also relevant because the logic of social media invites precisely such live updates and facilitates the exchange of real-time updates for both professional users (such as media and sports organizations) and fans (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013; Vis, 2013). So what else can a live ticker offer?

In this chapter, we explore this question by examining what kind of content German sports media provided via their live ticker apps during the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. This mega-event lends itself particularly well to our analysis as it was highly politicized and rather critically perceived (Hartmann et al., 2023), thus inviting coverage that goes beyond the usual approach focusing on results and purely sports-related topics.

To explore how the approach may differ for live ticker apps, we included both established sports media and more peripheral actors in our analysis. Broader research on peripheral media and their influence on the journalistic field has shown

that such actors have the potential to disrupt the journalistic field by taking new approaches (Eldridge, 2019), sometimes setting standards to which established media adapt (Maares & Hanusch, 2022). In relation to live ticker apps, it may therefore be that more peripheral sports media agonistically abandon the stick-to-sports approach and offer information that adds value against the backdrop of current media consumption patterns and the threat to the legitimacy of sports journalism posed in particular by the athletes and sports organizations themselves.

To find out how exactly German sports media used live ticker apps during the FIFA World Cup, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the content of such apps offered by mainstream and more peripheral media. Before presenting and discussing our findings, we first introduce some basic characteristics of live tickers and discuss their relevance with regard to changing patterns of media use and current trends in sports journalism.

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## 2 The Live Ticker and Digital (Sports) Journalism

### 2.1 The Live Ticker as a Tool for Event-Oriented Reporting

The ongoing digitalization of the media landscape has led to various transformation processes in contemporary journalism. Technological innovations have continually changed or even expanded the capabilities of the profession (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2017; Gynnild, 2014; Hebbel-Seeger & Horky, 2018). These processes affect not only how news can be produced by journalists (Kunert, 2020; Rojas-Torrijos, 2021) but also the consumption habits of the audience (Garnarcz, 2009; McEnnis, 2022). In that connection, news organizations have widely embraced the internet and provide information via their digital channels often particularly tailored to match respective affordances (Neuberger, 2020).

The format of the so-called live ticker serves as a prime example of this development. The term *ticker*, used in Germany as a shorthand for news ticker, was originally applied to the analog teleprinters in use from the 1930s to the 1990s for transmitting messages in journalistic newsrooms (Smułczyński, 2019). The root of the word derives from the English verb “to tick” (Siehr, 2016, p. 104), representing the rhythmic sound heard by the message recipient. The word *live* is added to emphasize the transmitted information’s immediacy and authenticity (Siehr, 2016). Although analog teleprinters are no longer in use, the term ticker remains common in editorial offices (Smułczyński, 2019). Today, it refers to sections or digital tickers that publish headlines in chronological sequences on various websites. In English-speaking contexts, terms like “live blogs” (McEnnis, 2016; Thurman &

Newman, 2017) or “live commentaries” (Chovanec, 2018; Jucker, 2010) refer to similar tools.

In the 1990s, the British newspaper *The Guardian* was the first to employ a live ticker—calling it a “minute by minute” (Vaahtoranta, 2017)—in its online news coverage. Tellingly, it originated in the paper’s sports desk. Subsequently, other leading news organizations such as the *BBC*, *Die Zeit*, and *The New York Times* (Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) adopted this format as well, extending the issues that were covered through real-time updates beyond the realm of sports. Through their capability of providing continuous real-time information, live tickers nowadays cover a broad spectrum of topics. They are suitable to report both on sudden and planned major events such as political elections, natural disasters, award ceremonies and, of course, sporting events (Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Siehr, 2016). In this context, live tickers distribute important “breaking news” at high speed, often more accurately and faster than traditional news articles could achieve (Thurman & Walters, 2013).

In their presentation, live tickers typically feature a reverse chronological order of events, where the latest update appears first (Hauser, 2010; Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Thurman & Walters, 2013). Additionally, text-based entries and brief written comments, which live tickers have long solely relied on, are often supplemented by graphical and tabular elements (Bieber & Hebecker, 2002; Hauser, 2010). Since live tickers generally maintain a playful and informal tone, they do not necessarily apply to the same standards as traditional news reporting which is rather characterized by a factual style. Unlike more traditional journalistic formats, they may reflect the subjective reality of the journalists at the very time of posting the update (Thurman & Walters, 2013) and incorporate various discourses (Van der Lubben et al., 2023).

In coexistence with other channels such as radio or television, the live ticker has developed its own distinct profile. Modern live ticker apps may include additional social media content or interactive elements such as push notifications and user chats to further minimize the social and temporal distance to the actual events (Smułczyński, 2019; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018). They also occasionally integrate elements, such as artificial intelligence, into their product portfolio (Broussard et al., 2019). The specific efficacy of live tickers lies in their capability to translate suspense and emotions into text messages, while simultaneously delivering statistical data, thereby creating an enhanced supplementary offering (Smułczyński, 2019).

The structure of modern live ticker apps often includes various segments. While the main segment primarily provides text-based information units (Hauser, 2010), the auxiliary segments extend the offering with multimodal additional functions

such as videos, interactive live graphics, audio streams, and social media integrations (Smułczyński, 2019; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018). Characteristic of these segments is that they are periodically updated and can convey different impressions of the events. Particularly in specific places, such as a courtroom or a crisis area, where neither radio nor television coverage would be possible, the live ticker offers unique potential for live reporting (Smułczyński, 2019). This also applies to major sporting events for which only a few media own broadcasting rights (Boyle, 2015).

Despite their diversity, sports reporting has emerged as the primary field of application for live tickers (Hauser, 2010; Siehr, 2016). In Germany, for example, platforms such as *Kicker online* and *Sportschau* became pioneers of this format (Bieber & Hebecker, 2002). They enable fans to follow events such as football matches, Formula 1 races, or the Olympic Games in real-time without having access to video broadcasts. Nowadays, there is hardly an online outlet that does not offer a live ticker to cover sporting events in real-time. Apparently, the likelihood of live ticker coverage increases with the public relevance of a sporting event.

## 2.2 Live Tickers as an Enhanced Form of Second-Screen Usage

The relevance and use of live tickers has continued to increase in connection with second screen use (Beils, 2023). Second screens, such as smartphones or tablets, are used in parallel to the *first screen* and offer users the opportunity to access information, engage in exchanges, or utilize interactive content, e. g., through the integration of social media (Pfeffel et al., 2016; Stauff, 2015).

Especially during sports viewing, simultaneous activities on the *second screen* are highly popular. In that connection, research has revealed a variety of user motives fostering the employment of more than one screen (Oelrichs & Leinfelder, 2022). In that regard, live tickers are particularly popular, as they enhance the possibilities through interactive statistics or direct feedback options. For example, users can instantly exchange views on controversial scenes or seek for assessments of other community members (Bixler & Friemel, 2017). However, compared to audiovisual media, live tickers initially require significantly less attention and can be used by users at any location with internet access (Thurman & Walters, 2013). Live tickers, in the sense of the second screen, are also suitable for accessing additional features during sports viewing, which the first screen does not offer. Examples include the integration of fantasy sports or live betting (Krell & Nieland, 2022). These gamification elements can be deliberately used by media organizations to engage viewers with their platform (De Michele & Furini, 2017). Thus, the offering

of live tickers during a (sports) event enhances the second-screen experience by providing context-related additional offerings and real-time updates, enabling greater participation from viewers (Pfeffel et al., 2016) which, in turn, may help to increase the legitimacy of sports media exactly providing such additional sense.

Against this background, the question arises as to whether modern live tickers should continue to focus solely on results in chronological order. With the integration of social media and the possibility of user feedback, today's live ticker apps open up multiple or even new areas of application. Recent examples from journalistic practice have shown that live tickers can also be utilized to address background aspects and additional information (Oswald, 2017; Siehr, 2016).

Therefore, the question emerges as to the extent to which live tickers are used to offer more than mere event- and result-oriented sports reporting. For instance, they might also address critical controversies or other background aspects.

### **2.3 Disruption of Sports Journalism and Boundary Work**

However, it is clear from previous research on sports reporting that it has long tended to neglect social issues, focusing instead primarily on sporting events and people in sports (Rowe, 2007). This uncritical approach to the subject has earned sports journalism the dubious reputation of being the “toy department” (McEnnis, 2020; Rowe, 2007) in newsrooms, staffed by “fans with typewriters” (Boyle, 2006). Despite this bad reputation for failing in normative, cognitive and evaluative terms (McEnnis, 2020), the sports desk used to have a strong position in newsrooms as it served as a commercial engine that attracted large audiences and thus advertisers (Boyle, 2017). In the digital age, however, this importance of the sports desk is diminishing. While sports players used to rely on visibility through sports media, they can now bypass traditional sports coverage and communicate directly with their stakeholders (Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). As they are no longer reliant on sports coverage, they are increasingly denying sports journalists privileged access to events (Sherwood et al., 2017)—but authority in sports journalism used to be claimed precisely through access. In this situation, sports journalism has become interchangeable or even inferior when it comes to providing exclusive insights and real-time updates on unfolding events (Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke, 2023). So it is sport itself that is disrupting sports journalism and putting its legitimacy in jeopardy. It should be emphasized that sports journalists are not alone in this situation. Fellow journalists in other fields are facing similar challenges from new entrants on the periphery of the field and feel pressured to distance themselves from these “insurgents” (Perreault & Bell, 2022) in order to (re)gain their authority and

privileges (Maares & Hanusch, 2022; Schapals et al., 2019). To demonstrate how journalism is demarcated from non-journalism, they employ strategies of boundary work (Carlson, 2015). In this context, three different strategies can be distinguished, following Gieryn (1983): To distinguish between genuine journalism and non-journalism, (1) deviant actors and practices can be excluded (expulsion), (2) new actors and practices can be embraced and discursively incorporated into the field (expansion), or (3) journalistic actors can focus on their difference from new entrants by invoking professional practices and norms, thus protecting their autonomy from outside influences (Carlson, 2015). Research on other beats has shown that journalists tend to employ precisely the latter strategy, discursively invoking professional norms to claim legitimacy (Singer, 2015). But, as Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) argue, this is difficult to implement for sports journalism, since it is (1) not traditionally characterized by the pursuit of such norms, as (2) critical reporting would risk losing access altogether, and as (3) it is questionable whether sports audiences would even value such a pursuit of normative claims. However, as sports journalism is de facto at a crossroads on how to (re)gain legitimacy, research has already found that it has moved away from a ‘stick to sports’ approach (Broussard, 2020), increasingly drawing on norms and practices from other journalistic beats (McEnnis, 2020) and reporting on socio-political issues of sporting events (Sadri et al., 2022). Such an approach seems particularly appropriate when it comes to reporting on mega sporting events, which are often accompanied by rather critical topics such as allegations of corruption or human rights violations. In this respect, the 2022 FIFA World Cup is a suitable example.

## **2.4 Thematic Background: Controversial Discourses Within the World Cup Coverage by German Media**

The FIFA Men’s World Cup is an international sporting tournament conducted every 4 years since 1930 by the organization Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (fifa.com, 2023). The 22nd edition of the tournament was historically significant as it represented the first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East. In December 2010, then-FIFA President Joseph Blatter announced the awarding of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar.

Under the slogan “Expect Amazing” the World Cup opening took place on November 20, 2022 (Stotz et al., 2022). Aiming for further superlatives with the “longest opening ceremony in history” (sportschau.de, 2022a), the intent was also to make a statement for tolerance and inclusion. Although the tournament in Qatar

was envisioned as a platform for innovation and intercultural dialogue, it remained beset by multiple controversies from its awarding to well beyond the final.

The coverage by German media of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar highlighted a range of controversial issues that extended far beyond the confines of the sport. From the outset, themes of corruption and bribery attempts in the World Cup awarding process were evident (dw.com, 2010; kicker.de, 2010; spiegel.de, 2010). As the tournament progressed, the focus increasingly shifted to human rights issues in Qatar, particularly concerning the migrant workers responsible for constructing the World Cup stadiums.

Another discourse pertained to the environmental impacts of the event. German media specifically addressed the high energy consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of the air-conditioned stadiums (Lorenzen, 2022a). The lack of sustainability of the construction projects after the tournament's ending (Lorenzen, 2022b) and the decision to move the World Cup to the winter months were also highlighted in this context (tagesschau.de, 2022). Furthermore, societal differences between Qatar and the participating nations sparked discussions. In this context, restrictions on women and the LGBTQ community were reported (Mixa, 2021; Weber, 2022).

Ultimately, the role of the media itself became a focal point. German media outlets intensely debated the demands for a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar before the tournament began (Kiedaisch, 2022; MDR.de., 2022). In this regard, considerations were made on whether (sporting) coverage indirectly legitimized the problematic conditions or, conversely, whether journalistic presence on-site could contribute to the investigative processing of the issues (spiegel.de, 2022; sportschau.de, 2022b).

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### 3 Research Questions

In view of the current trends in sports journalism, it seems questionable what added value sports media can offer their audience if they limit their live ticker apps to event-oriented reporting, especially in light of the critical discourse surrounding the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. However, such event-oriented provision of real-time updates is exactly what live tickers are capable of. Therefore, we ask research question RQ1:

*RQ1: What features characterize the content of the live tickers offered by German media during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar?*

Against the background of the traditional event orientation of sports journalism and the potential of the format to cover events in a timely manner on the one hand, and the observation that the “stick to sports” approaches may not be sufficient to claim legitimacy in view of the athletes’ own media efforts and the (socio-political) controversies surrounding the World Cup on the other hand, we posed the following sub-research question SRQ1:

*SRQ1: How (if at all) do German media outlets’ live ticker apps cover controversial discourses and additional background aspects during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar?*

With SRQ1, we not only want to uncover the topics dealt with in these texts, but also find out which journalistic functions manifest themselves here and what kind of actors predominate.

Taking into account previous research on current trends in sports journalism, we pay particular attention to whether established (sports) media and new entrants to the field take different approaches to the use of live ticker apps. Boundary work arguments suggest that traditional media might try to protect their autonomy against insurgents by invoking traditional journalistic norms, which would then lead them to pay more attention to the socio-political aspects of the mega-event. However, it could also be argued that it is the new entrants who take a more critical stance and act as agonists (Eldridge, 2019). While the focus of this study is on the content of the live ticker apps, one could assume that the new entrants serve as role models in terms of presentation style (Sehl & Cornia, 2021), encouraging the established broadcasters to expand and develop their approach to live ticker formats as well. With SRQ2, we look at potential differences between established media organizations and more peripheral live ticker apps.

*SRQ2: How does the coverage in live ticker apps differ between established media outlets and new entrants to the field?*

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## **4 Method**

### **4.1 Methodical Approach**

In order to answer our RQs we examined the live ticker coverage by German media outlets during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. More specifically, we employed

a qualitative content analysis of live ticker apps, aiming to systematize their offerings and to empirically capture their complexities. Doing this, we adhered to the framework proposed by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), with a primary focus on qualitative content to explore the diverse aspects of these digital platforms. Although the term *qualitative* initially implies a purely interpretive method, statistical procedures and quantitative investigation steps were also integrated. Quantitative data in live ticker apps, for example, relate to frequencies and occurrences of specific content, while qualitative data emphasize the diversity and significance of content presentation forms in the study.

For the examination of live ticker apps, a specific unit of analysis was defined in advance. Each individual post of the live tickers was considered as a unit that could be assigned to the corresponding categories. It was crucial whether the post related to the pre-report, the actual in-game report, or the subsequent post-report.

## 4.2 Sampling

To ensure a valid sample of the live ticker offerings by German media outlets we distinguished between established media organizations and new entrants to the (sports) journalistic field.

Established media are considered those traditional organizations who have secured a significant position in the German media market over decades. This typically includes print media such as newspapers and magazines, broadcast and television stations, and their online platforms (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). For this study, seven private media outlets (*11 Freunde*, *Der Spiegel*, *Kicker*, *Sport Bild*, *Sport1*, *Spox*, *t-online/Magenta*) and one public broadcasting source (*Sportschau*) were selected. According to Mienert (2021), these organizations record the highest website traffic among established outlets and they are predominantly viewed as trustworthy news sources in Germany (Newman et al., 2024). In addition to apps offered by media organizations, we included the official app of the German Football Association (*Mein DFB*) in our sample. Although this is an in-house offering, it relies on feeds from an established journalistic format, namely the Sport-Informationen-Dienst (sid), a German news agency specializing in sports content (see Table 8.2).

In digital media landscapes new actors, hereinafter referred to as “newcomer” (Bertling & Schierl, 2020, p. 20), have entered the scene, providing content that is similar to that of established formats. These are largely digital-born media companies (Sehl & Cornia, 2021) that do not necessarily have their own print edition and instead primarily publish within smartphone apps or offer purely web-based

content. Representing such media newcomers, five private media producers were selected (*flashscore*, *fotmob*, *onefootball*, *sofascore*, *Toralarm*), which are among the most popular sports apps in Germany (similarweb.com, 2023) and offered a live ticker app during the World Cup in Qatar.

Hence, a total of 14 live ticker apps was selected, with the aim of adequately representing German live ticker coverage during the World Cup in Qatar paying particular attention to identify similarities and differences between established actors and new entrants (see Table 8.1).

Another pivotal aspect pertains to the role of text providers. They are crucial for creating and delivering the content presented in German live ticker apps. This includes both in-house editorial teams of the respective media outlets as well as external service organizations and agencies. It was observed that different ticker apps occasionally utilize the same text provider (see Table 8.2). A unique case was the app *sofascore*, which relied exclusively on data-driven information, thereby excluding it from this categorization.

**Table 8.1** Selection of 14 German live ticker apps (established and media newcomers), year of first publication/web presence based on data from Appbrain.com (n.d.) and Web.archive.org (n.d.)

Established media outlets	Media type	First publication/web presence
11 Freunde	Print & Online	2000/2000
Der Spiegel	Print & Online	1947/1996
Kicker	Print & Online	1920/1998
Mein DFB	Online	-/1998
Sport Bild	Print & Online	1988/2009
Sport1	TV & Online	1993/1997
Sportschau	TV & Online	1961/1998
Spox	Online	-/2007
t-online/Magenta	Online	-/1997
<b>Media newcomers:</b>		
flashscore	Online	-/2014
fotmob	Online	-/2010
onefootball	Online	-/2011
sofascore	Online	-/2015
Toralarm	Online	-/2012

**Table 8.2** Assignment of text providers and media outlets

Text providers	Media outlets
11 Freunde Online Editorial Team	11 Freunde
Der Spiegel Online Editorial Team	Der Spiegel
Heim:Spiel Medien GMBH	Sport Bild, Toralarm
Kicker Online Editorial Team	Kicker
Livesport (Media) Group	flashscore
OPTA & Sportal (DAZN Group)	fotmob, onefootball, Sport1, Spox, t-online/Magenta
Sportinformationsdienst (sid)	Mein DFB
Sportschau-Team	Sportschau

### 4.3 Data Collection

The data collection focused on the period of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, which took place from November 20 (opening match) to December 18, 2022 (final). Prior to the tournament's start, the predetermined ticker applications were installed on two Android 12 smartphones from the Google Play Store. Each device was equipped with exactly seven apps, without differentiating between established or newcomer media outlets. Both smartphones were also identically configured in terms of app presentation and permissions to ensure consistent data collection. For systematization, the decision was made to use screenshots within the live ticker apps as the units of analysis, which could later be categorized into the category system. In total, 12,785 postings, collected from the 14 live ticker apps, were subject to our qualitative analysis.

To establish a comprehensive set of match days and games, a purposive pre-selection was necessary. For the group stage, which took place from November 20 to December 2, 2022, the host team Qatar and the German team were selected. This choice took into account the limited spatial and temporal scope of the study and emphasized the expected high societal relevance of both teams from the perspective of German media outlets.

As the World Cup journey for both teams ended after the group stage, we had to adjust our sampling criteria for the knockout phase, which took place from December 3–18, 2022. Here, we decided to select one match per round, using the FIFA World Ranking at the time of the World Cup (fifa.com, 2022) as a benchmark. Accordingly, the ranking positions of the qualified teams were added up before each matchday and the match with the lowest total score was selected. This approach aimed to capture the duel of the greatest possible interest to German media outlets. After each matchday, this selection was repeated, taking into account the teams that qualified.

As a result, a total of six matches from the group stage and another four games from the final round were included in the study population, which consequently comprised ten games of the 2022 Qatar World Cup:

1. Qatar vs. Ecuador (Matchday 1, 11/20/22)
2. Germany vs. Japan (Matchday 1, 11/23/22)
3. Qatar vs. Senegal (Matchday 2, 11/25/22)
4. Spain vs. Germany (Matchday 2, 11/27/22)
5. Netherlands vs. Qatar (Matchday 3, 11/29/22)
6. Costa Rica vs. Germany (Matchday 3, 12/01/22)
7. England vs. Senegal (Round of 16, 12/04/22)
8. England vs. France (Quarterfinal, 12/10/22)
9. Argentina vs. Croatia (Semifinal, 12/13/22)
10. Argentina vs. France (Final, 12/18/22)

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

To address the research questions, we derived three main categories from previous research on sports reporting (Barinova, 2010; Bertling & Schierl, 2020; English, 2021; Rowe, 2007; Sadri et al., 2022) (see Table 8.3).

Main Category 1 explored the various text functions of live ticker apps. Due to the high frequency of posts by the ticker, information often takes precedence (Barinova, 2010). Additionally, the conveyance of information is frequently complemented by entertainment in sports reporting (Bertling & Schierl, 2020). Beyond these two primary text functions, opinions and explicit criticism can also be expressed (Barinova, 2010). However, in critical-evaluative reporting, it is assumed that such content is integrated within an informative or entertaining context (Bertling & Schierl, 2020).

**Table 8.3** Main Categories and Sources of Deduction

Main categories	Source of deductive derivation
MC 1: text functions	Barinova (2010), Bertling and Schierl (2020)
MC 2: theme relevance	Rowe (2007), Sadri et al. (2022)
MC 3: emphasis on individual actors	Bertling and Schierl (2020), English (2021)

Main Category 2 addressed the relevance of different topics in live ticker texts. Sports journalism has traditionally focused on reporting sports events and the actors immediately involved in them (Rowe, 2007). However, sports reporting is not limited to mentioning statistics or reporting wins and losses (Sadri et al., 2022). This observation is applicable to live tickers. The coverage can also address societal contexts such as “fairness” and “morality” (Sadri et al., 2022, p. 509). In the context of the World Cup in Qatar, in addition to game-related topics, controversies also emerged during the tournament (see Sect. 2.4).

Main Category 3 focused on the emphasis on individual actors (Bertling & Schierl, 2020). In this context, it’s not uncommon for audiences to associate the participation of a well-known athlete or club with the overall quality of the sports event. This perception can be strategically leveraged by journalists to expand audience reach. Moreover, preferential representations can serve to underscore critical aspects concerning the actors within the coverage (English, 2021).

Following the derivation of the deductive main categories, the collected material was accordingly coded. The relevant units of analysis from the match days were classified into the category system. Subsequent to this phase, the next step involved further differentiation of the initially rather general data. Through this deductive-inductive approach, as described by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), coherent subcategories emerged after the completion of the first coding process. In some instances, these subcategories were further differentiated. The following chapter will present the relevant findings of the study, based on the research questions and organized along the main categories.

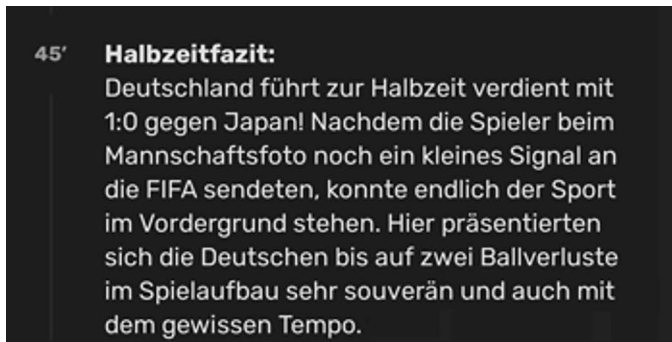
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## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Text Function

Regarding the function of the live ticker texts, a dichotomy between either primarily informative or entertaining text functions became already apparent during the formation of the subcategories. We found that the reporting on the World Cup in Qatar in the examined live ticker apps was predominantly informative (see also Table 8.5). This primary text function was consistently supplemented with entertaining elements, with one exception (*flashscore*), supporting the argument by Bertling and Schierl (2020).

Additionally, isolated instances of critical-evaluative comments were observed among these informative live ticker apps, which were always integrated into the textual context of information or entertainment (see Fig. 8.1). However, we also

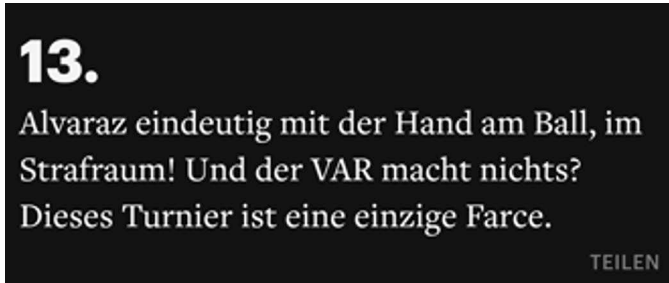


**Fig. 8.1** Critical-evaluative comment in the context of information GERMANY vs. JAPAN, TORALARM-APP (Translation: Half-time summary: Germany deservedly lead Japan 1–0 at half-time! After the players sent a small signal to FIFA during the team photo, the focus was finally on the sport. With the exception of two ball losses in the build-up to the game, the Germans presented themselves very confidently and with a certain tempo)

found that evaluative comments decreased throughout the tournament in the informative-oriented live ticker apps. While discussions and evaluations, especially about the tournament and the circumstances in Qatar, were present at the beginning, these diminished almost completely among the outlets by the final game.

In contrast, the media outlets *11 Freunde* and *Der Spiegel* focused on the entertaining text function. This tone in both apps was either expanded by an informative and evaluative (*Der Spiegel*) or a purely evaluative (*11 Freunde*) function. A noticeable reduction in critical comments was not observed for either organization (see Fig. 8.2).

Comparing established media outlets with new entrants to the field revealed specific trends in relation to text functions. The analysis showed that established outlets like *11 Freunde*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Sportschau*, with their own editorial teams, published more critical or evaluative postings in the live ticker apps. These journalistic organizations from Germany consciously chose to address the circumstances surrounding the World Cup, maintaining this critical tone in their live ticker coverage predominantly until the final game. In contrast, such aspects were almost entirely absent in some newcomer apps like *flashscore* and *sofascore*.



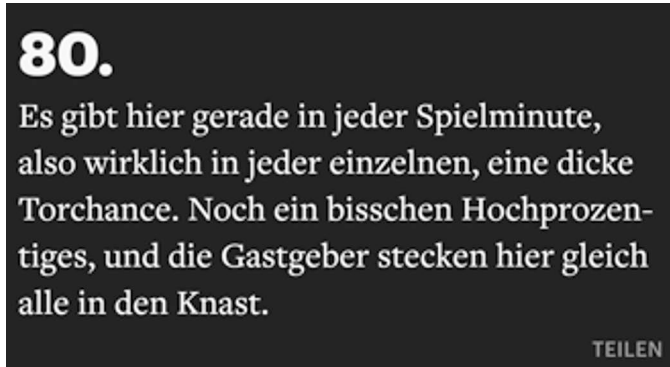
**Fig. 8.2** Critical-evaluative comment in the World Cup final game ARGENTINA vs. FRANCE, 11 Freunde-APP (Translation: Alvarez with his hand on the ball in the penalty area! And the VAR does nothing? This tournament is a farce)

## 5.2 Theme Relevance

With regard to the prevalent issues in the live ticker apps, it became evident that not only game-related topics but also World Cup controversies and other substantive background aspects were addressed (see Table 8.4). Critical discourses about the World Cup in Qatar were initially found in nearly all live ticker texts. The only exceptions were the AI-generated text of *flashscore* and the purely data-driven content of *sofascore*, which lacked any references towards World Cup controversies throughout the tournament (see also Table 8.5).

In order to analyze the occurrence of different topics in more detail, we also used this main category to examine whether certain patterns emerge depending on whether the texts were published before the game, during the game or after the game. Here, we found that controversies primarily appeared in the pre-game reporting (33 different thematic references) and, to a slightly lesser extent, in the in-game reporting (24 thematic references). Critical topics were least present in the post-game reports (13 thematic references). This was also due to the fact that most media outlets (*flashscore*, *fotmob*, *Kicker*, *onefootball*, *Sport Bild*, *Sport1*, *Sportschau*, *Spox*, *t-online/Magenta*, *Toralarm*) largely omitted detailed post-game coverage in their live ticker apps.

Similar to our analysis of text functions, we also found for the category of theme relevance that after the opening game between Qatar and Ecuador, many ticker apps increasingly relegated critical discourses to the background. By the last group match of Germany against Costa Rica, the discussion of World Cup controversies was only picked up by *11 Freunde* (see Fig. 8.3). Although the thematic reference to controversies rose again across media outlets for the final game between



**Fig. 8.3** Controversial discourse in Germany’s last World Cup group match COSTA RICA vs. GERMANY, 11 Freunde-APP (Translation: There’s a great chance to score in every minute of the game, every single minute really. One more high percentage and the hosts will put everyone in jail)

Argentina and France, it did not reach the intensity of the earlier analyzed group stage games involving Qatar and Germany.

While controversies generally declined, a further trend could be observed. This involved the discussion of other background aspects. Initially sparse, these reached their peak by the final day. In particular, the mention of former national players and international sports clubs related to the teams competing in the game moved into the focus of coverage.

Comparing established media outlets and new entrants to the field, our analysis revealed clear differences in terms of topics addressed. Again, it was the live ticker apps with their own editorial teams that showed an above-average discussion of World Cup controversies, while this thematic reference was comparatively under-represented in the media newcomer apps.

### 5.3 Emphasis on Individual Actors

To determine whether certain media organizations in their sports reporting specifically highlighted individuals, institutions, or national teams without direct relevance to the game, we examined to what extent individual actors were emphasized in live ticker apps. To ensure analytical clarity in this main category, it was predetermined that an actor must be mentioned positively and/or negatively in at least three ticker postings. It was predominantly observed that individuals (especially star players of

**Table 8.4** Identified world cup controversies and other background aspects within the live ticker apps of German media outlets

<b>Identified world cup controversies:</b>	<b>Occurrence</b>
Air-conditioned stadiums	In-game report
Alcohol ban	Pre-game report, In-game report
Awarding to Qatar	Pre-game report
Boycott	Pre-game report, In-game report
Censorship	Pre-game report
Corruption	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Criticism of award ceremony	Post-game report
Criticism of closing ceremony	Pre-game report
Criticism of extra time	In-game report
Criticism of FIFA (general)	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Criticism of game countdown	In-game report
Criticism of the stadium	In-game report
Criticism of the world cup (general)	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Director of human rights watch	Pre-game report
Diversity	Pre-game report
Double standards	In-game report
Fans existing early	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Forced labor	Pre-game report, In-game report
Game manipulation	In-game report
German protest gesture	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Gianni Infantino	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Head of state of Qatar	Pre-game report, Post-game report
Homophobia	Pre-game report, In-game report
Human rights situation in Qatar	Pre-game report, Post-game report
Inclusion	Pre-game report
Justification for reporting	Pre-game report
Morgan Freeman	Pre-game report
One-love armband	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Other circumstances	Pre-game report
Penalties by FIFA	Pre-game report, In-game report
Poor stadium atmosphere	Post-game report
Qatar naturalizations	Pre-game report, In-game report
Reference to amnesty international	Pre-game report
Relief fund	Pre-game report
Riots	In-game report
Role of DFB	Pre-game report, In-game report
Sheikh garment for Messi (BISHT)	Post-game report
Spelling of the__final	In-game report

(continued)

**Table 8.4** (continued)

Sportswashing	Pre-game report, Post-game report
Stadium deconstruction	Pre-game report
Staged fans	Pre-game report, In-game report
Tolerance	Pre-game report
Virtue signalling	In-game report
Winter rescheduling	Pre-game report
World cup organization	Pre-game report
<b>Other Background Aspects:</b>	
Economy	Pre-game report
Environment	Pre-game report
Ethics	In-game report
Food and drink	Pre-game report, In-game report
Language	In-game report
Media actors	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Media companies	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Other sports	Pre-game report, In-game report
Places & attractions	Pre-game report, In-game report
Politics	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Religion	Pre-game report, In-game report
Society	In-game report, Post-game report
Sports actors	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Sports clubs	Pre-game report, In-game report, Post-game report
Stadium music	Pre-game report, In-game report
TV shows	Pre-game report, In-game report

**Table 8.5** Specific sports coverage of live ticker apps by German media outlets and main categories

<b>Main categories/ established media outlets:</b>	<b>MC 1: text functions</b>	<b>MC 2: theme relevance</b>	<b>MC 3: emphasis on individual actors</b>
<i>11 Freunde</i>	<b>Entertainment</b> (with evaluation)	<b>Primarily World Cup controversies</b>	<b>Individuals</b> (constant); <b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<i>Der Spiegel</i>	<b>Entertainment</b> (with information and evaluation)	<b>Game-related topics &amp; World Cup controversies</b>	<b>Individuals</b> (constant); <b>Institutions &amp; National Teams</b> (partially)

(continued)

**Table 8.5** (continued)

<i>Kicker</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	
<i>Mein DFB</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	
<i>Sport Bild</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Individuals</b> (partially)
<i>Sport1</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<i>Sportschau</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment and evaluation)	<b>Game-related topics &amp; World Cup controversies</b>	<b>Individuals</b> (constant)
<i>SpoX</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<i>t-online/Magenta</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<b>Media Newcomers:</b>			
<i>flashscore</i>	<b>Information</b>	<b>No World Cup controversies</b>	
<i>fotmob</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<i>onefootball</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Institutions</b> (partially)
<i>sofascore</i>	<b>No text</b>	<b>No World Cup controversies</b>	
<i>Toralarm</i>	<b>Information</b> (with entertainment)	<b>Primarily Game-related topics</b>	<b>Individuals</b> (partially)

the teams) or institutions were highlighted, which also supports the thesis by Bertling and Schierl (2020) that the attractiveness of a sporting event can subjectively increase for the audience when well-known actors are emphasized (see also Table 8.5).

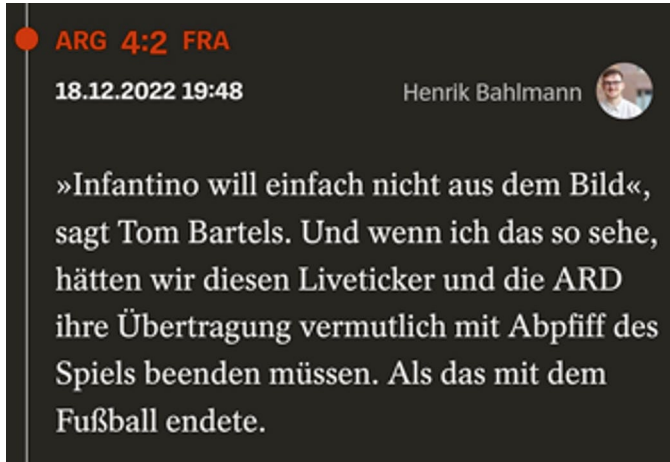
Notably within this main category was the critical portrayal of FIFA President Gianni Infantino, which, however, was consistent only in the apps from *11 Freunde* and *Der Spiegel*. These two media outlets consistently evaluated Infantino negatively, both in Qatar's opening game and in the final between Argentina and France (see Figs. 8.4 and 8.5).

Regarding the critical emphasis on institutions, a focus on the FIFA was noted. This negative portrayal was evident in the opening games of both Qatar (*fotmob*; *onefootball*; *Sport1*; *Spox*; *t-online/Magenta*) and Germany (*11 Freunde*; *Der Spiegel*), as well as in the final game (*Der Spiegel*).

Overall, the strong emphasis on star players and the comparatively minimal criticism of figures such as FIFA President Gianni Infantino can be interpreted as

**Fig. 8.4** Critical emphasis of FIFA President Gianni Infantino QATAR vs. ECUADOR, 11 Freunde-APP (Translation: Now Infantino. Opens the World Cup with a short speech, first in Arabic, then in Spanish, then in English, then, logically, in Parseltongue)





**Fig. 8.5** Critical emphasis of FIFA President Gianni Infantino ARGENTINA vs. FRANCE, Der Spiegel-APP (Translation: “Infantino just doesn’t want to leave the picture,” says Tom Bartels [German TV commentator]. And looking at it that way, we should probably have ended this live ticker and ARD’s broadcast at the final whistle. When the football ended)

an attempt by media outlets to divert readers’ attention to less controversial topics. However, it should be noted in the evaluation that the early elimination of teams from Germany and Qatar in the group stage could have significantly influenced the reporting by German media organizations.

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## 6 Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we tackled the question whether German live ticker apps offer more than their otherwise inherent or traditional event-focused reporting by addressing background elements and engaging in controversial discourses. We differentiated this leading RQ1 into two facets by focusing on the function and content of live ticker postings (SRQ1) and the differences between different media types (SRQ2). Our analysis of the coverage of the 2022 Men’s FIFA World Cup in Qatar, guided by a category-driven approach, revealed significant patterns that allow for interesting insights into the text functions and theme relevance of German media outlets during the tournament.

Answering SRQ1, we found that live ticker apps—unsurprisingly—focus on real-time updates of World Cup matches. However, they are also used to highlight

controversial aspects of the tournament and other background topics. German media have obviously recognized that social issues are closely linked to sports and are consequently addressing them even in their live coverage via live tickers. This can be seen not only in the selection of topics addressed, but also in the function of the postings and the actors presented. However, we found strong differences between the various (types of) media, which leads us to answering SRQ2.

Results strongly suggest that the quality and depth of sports reporting greatly depend on the choice of text providers. Established media outlets with their own editorial teams not only covered the events of the games more intensely in quantitative terms but also engaged more deeply with controversial topics surrounding the major sports event in Qatar. It is likely that these large editorial teams could adopt a critical perspective that goes far beyond what is expected from a mere event-focused text.

This fact also implies that German media companies are taking on greater editorial responsibility, particularly at a time when media organizations are faced with challenges such as a legitimacy crises (Banjac & Hanusch, 2023; Tong, 2018).

In contrast, newcomers appear to primarily rely on the provision of agency texts, which are informative but generally provide updates without significant framing. Additionally, the use of data-driven or AI-based methods for text creation demonstrates a high readiness for disruptive media innovations among media newcomers (Broersma & Singer, 2021; García-Avilés et al., 2018), yet it also raises further questions about the ethics and quality of these textual contents (Chugh, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos, 2021; Tobitt, 2023). Notably, in this study, no new media organization incorporated self-researched topics into their live ticker texts.

However, we also found that the controversial discourses about the World Cup in Qatar were predominantly placed in the pre-game reporting and somewhat less in the in-game reporting of the ticker apps. Moreover, these controversies visibly lost relevance as the tournament progressed. For some live ticker apps, the World Cup controversies even completely disappeared. This might indicate that German media outlets were aiming to refocus audience attention solely on the game action, possibly concerned to jeopardize the informational and entertainment value of their apps. This is also supported by the fact that live ticker apps, which primarily offered informative text functions, tended to embed their occasional critical discourses in a sports or entertainment context.

As any study, this one also comes with limitations. Regarding our sample, we could include 14 different live ticker apps, which were intended to exemplify the population of German live ticker apps. However, considering the emerging market of newcomer apps one could further differentiate the specific potential of individual organizations' reporting.

Moreover, the content analysis was limited to the German media system, thereby excluding the unique characteristics of other countries from the study. For a comprehensive analysis, it would therefore be sensible to incorporate transnational and international media organizations into the research design.

Another limitation concerns the timeframe of the analysis. This study specifically (and deliberately) focused on the offerings of German live ticker apps during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Further (longitudinal) studies would help to observe developments over time and examine reporting beyond such a critical case.

Finally, it is important to note potential biases in the results due to the employed categorization system. Qualitative content analysis involves subjective assessments and interpretations by the researcher (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). Therefore, revising the categorization system through additional deductive or inductive main and subcategories could, in future studies, consider previously unaddressed specifics and deepen the research field.

Despite these limitations, our findings shed light on recent trends in sports journalism and also invite interpretation against the broader backdrop of boundary work. In that connection, our study suggests that established media try to invoke traditional journalistic norms thereby taking a *Protection of Autonomy* strategy. As previously mentioned, some of the established outlets consciously chose to produce their own content (*11 Freunde*, *Der Spiegel*, *Kicker*, *Sportschau*) taking more critical and analytical approaches also referring to background issues beyond political controversies. This demonstrates a clear commitment by established media organizations to preserve their autonomy in journalistic practices (Carlson & Lewis, 2019). This contrasts with the practices of some new media companies, which tend to rely on pre-produced or AI-generated content.

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# A Political Football: Sports Broadcasters, Metajournalistic Discourse, and the Tension Between Critiquing and Covering the 2022 Qatar World Cup

Simon McEnnis

## 1 Introduction

The British football commentator, Gary Neville, appeared on the satirical comedy quiz programme *Have I Got News for You* on the BBC less than a month before he was due to start covering the 2022 World Cup in Qatar for Qatari state-funded broadcaster BeIn Sports. His team captain, Ian Hislop, was unflinching in his criticism of Neville. Hislop started by asking him: “You’re commentating there aren’t you? And what’s the defence?” Neville replied: “My view always has been that you either highlight the issues and challenges in these countries and speak about them, or you basically don’t say anything and you stay back home and don’t go. And I’ve always said we should challenge them.” Hislop was unimpressed by this response as he replied back: “There is another option, you stay at home and highlight the abuses. You don’t have to go and take the Qataris’ money. I’m not trying to be tiresome but it’s just not a very good defence” (Stolworthy, 2022a).

Neville and Hislop’s exchange on national television highlighted the dilemma confronting sports broadcasters as they approached the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. On the one hand, they were expected to highlight the human-rights abuses within the host country. However, they were also anticipated to take a stand and boycott

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covering the World Cup to starve Qatar of the oxygen of publicity as a televised spectacle. Sports broadcasters who criticised Qatar yet continued to cover the World Cup were viewed as hypocrites. It is the global televised exposure that has led to dubious political regimes showing a keen interest in hosting sports mega-events, a process known as ‘sportswashing’ (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Boykoff, 2022; Fruh et al., 2022). Here, host nations appropriate mega-events as a promotional and advertising vehicle to project a positive national image. Qatar 2022 was a particularly extreme example of sportswashing in that FIFA, in its awarding of the World Cup to the Gulf state in 2010, was prepared to overlook some rather fundamental problems. These issues included the World Cup needing to move from a summer to winter tournament due to the intense heat and the lack of existing stadium infrastructure that led to a substantial building programme, with migrant labour utilised and exploited (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015).

The men’s football World Cup must be shown on free-to-air television in the UK because of ‘listed events’ rules that ensure “certain events of national interest are available to view live, and for free, by the widest possible audience” (Ofcom, 2019). The Broadcasting Act of 1996 granted power to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to devise a list of sports events of national interest. Broadcasters who can meet the qualifying criteria of being free-to-air and reach 95% of the population then need to apply for consent from the broadcast regulator, Ofcom (Ofcom, 2019).

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Independent Television (ITV), a commercial free-to-air provider that incorporates advertising through commercial breaks before, during and after its programming, have historically shared live coverage of the World Cup. The BBC is funded by a licence fee that each household, unless exempt, needs to pay by law.<sup>1</sup> The TV licence applies to watching or recording live TV on any channel or service and the use of BBC iPlayer, an online, on-demand platform. Qatar 2022 came at a particularly challenging time for the BBC politically. Nadine Dorries as culture secretary of a right-wing Conservative government between September 2021 and September 2022 had created a hostile environment for the BBC that involved freezing the licence fee amount for 2 years with a view to abolishing it completely in 2027 (Waterson, 2022a).

Boyle (2006, p. 76) considers sports broadcasting to be a form of journalism that is “informed by a hybrid of values drawn from television entertainment

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<sup>1</sup>The BBC licence fee is a requirement in law under the Communications Act 2003 and the Communications (Television Licensing) Regulations 2004 (as amended) (UK Government, 2024).

conventions and those of broadcast journalism” although there is even a lack of consensus among broadcasters as to whether their work constitutes journalism or not. Sports broadcasting holds similar and shared belief and values systems to print journalists. Broadcasters are expected to be impartial, objective and independent and, certainly in the case of the BBC, have public-service/societal obligations. The Neville/BeIn Sports example also points to a diaspora of UK broadcasters who appear on television networks in other territories, such as the Middle East and the US.

Metajournalistic discourse offers a valuable lens for understanding how journalists “think about their work, delineate the boundaries of the field and stabilize the field amidst crisis” (Perreault et al., 2023, p. 843). Professionalism as a discourse is particularly important to journalism in securing continued legitimacy and authority (Carlson, 2017). Metajournalistic discourse involves public-facing proclamations about journalism, whether that be from journalists or other actors. Journalists use discourse to determine who is a legitimate actor, what practices classify as journalism and what professional norms and behaviours look like (Carlson, 2015).

This chapter explores how sports broadcasters use public-facing discourse to navigate the tension between both criticising and promoting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar while also countering hostile, politically motivated interventions that offered alternative interpretations of professionalism. In doing so, it focuses on the BBC context given that they were placed in the media spotlight in particular both because of their public-service/licence-fee obligations and because of the politically hostile environment surrounding it at the time.

Here, metajournalistic discourse becomes a navigational tool for sports broadcasters to reconcile conflicting positionality and still obtain public acceptance and legitimacy. However, rhetoric is also a site for contestation on what journalism is and should be, both from inside and outside the profession, that is situated in the complexity of the political and ideological landscape of the UK before and during Qatar 2022. In conducting this analysis, the chapter draws from key, high-profile metajournalistic discourses that received significant media attention and coverage, such as the BBC’s World Cup opening game transmission on Sunday, November 20.

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## **2 Political Metajournalistic Discourse**

### **2.1 ‘Stick to Sports’ as Political Narrative**

Hislop’s stance in the opening of this chapter points towards a clear expectation that sports broadcasters should take a moral stand against the World Cup being held

in Qatar. This position takes a view that sports journalists should use their privileged voice to challenge injustice and provide a watchdog on power (Rowe, 2016). There was an alternative public discourse, mainly perpetrated by those in power, that sports broadcasters should not have been criticising the Qatar World Cup at all and focus instead on the football. Qatar 2022 is an example of where sports broadcasters' decision to speak out on human-rights issues was contested as to whether it could constitute public service or unprofessional behaviour.

Neville criticised the UK Government alongside Qatar during ITV's World Cup final broadcast when he argued people should be against low pay and poor working conditions whether it involves migrant workers in Qatar or National Health Service staff in ITV's World Cup football broadcast). However, the UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak responded with the comment: "I think when most people are tuning in to watch Gary Neville they want to hear about the football and watch the football. They don't want to discuss politics" (Walker, 2022). FIFA had written to all 32 teams at the start of the tournament to ask them to "please do not allow football to be dragged into every ideological or political battle that exists" (Scott, 2022). BBC presenter Gary Lineker responded to FIFA's letter by stating "Stick to football, said FIFA. Well, we will for a couple of minutes at least" (BBC: Opening World Cup Broadcast, 2022).

## **2.2 Sports Broadcasters as Hypocrites and Money Grabbers**

One way that the BBC attempted to reconcile the tension between covering and critiquing the World Cup was to not broadcast the opening ceremony, considered to be the pivotal moment in mega-events when governments and regimes can impose political and nationalistic narratives on the global stage, on its main challenges, although it was available on its interactive Red Button service and iPlayer. The BBC instead partly replaced it with a lengthy discussion between presenters and studio guests about the key issues surrounding the World Cup being held in Qatar. However, the BBC did proceed to televise live the opening match between Qatar and Ecuador.

*The Independent* journalist Nick Hilton (2022) backed the BBC's approach and that it showed the broadcaster could do sport and politics. He commented, "The duty to moral rigour upheld on BBC One, with obligations as an international broadcast partner pushed to the digital margins". However, other commentators were more critical. Former national newspaper editor and television presenter Piers Morgan told his Twitter followers that it was: "Outrageously disrespectful to Qatar

that the BBC didn't broadcast the World Cup opening ceremony, and instead put out more virtue-signalling guff about how awful it is. If they're that appalled, they should bring home their vast army of employees and spare us this absurd hypocrisy" (Stolworthy, 2022b). The BBC responded to Morgan by stating that they had not shown previous opening ceremonies on their main channel. A spokesman told *The Independent*: "Just like previous tournaments, we haven't shown the opening ceremony on BBC One. Full build-up and coverage of the World Cup has been available across the BBC, including the opening ceremony on iPlayer" (Stolworthy, 2022b).

The *Daily Mail* website ran a story consisting of tweets that criticised the BBC (Blake, 2022). One tweet read: "Alex Scott talking rubbish about how much people got paid to work but they're all sitting there getting paid plenty loads to sit there themselves. You're part of it!" Another commented: 'I've just tuned into the BBC to watch the FIFA World Cup and I appear to be getting a political broadcast". Another read: "...the pundits on BBC made me sick to the stomach. Especially Gary Lineker and Alex Scott sitting there being all holier than thou, yet the bottom line is they took the money ahead of their morals". One tweet pointed to the sensitivity around the BBC's funding model by stating: "Why is the BBC not showing the opening ceremony. Why are we paying tv license (sic)".

A key discursive battleground for the BBC during the World Cup involved one of its broadcasters, Alex Scott, a former England women's footballer who has never revealed her sexuality but is believed to have been in relationships with both men and women (McLoughlin, 2022). Scott was vocal about the human rights issues surrounding Qatar, particularly its attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Scott stated her position during the BBC's opening broadcast: "When you sit and have conversations, I've had conversations about I should be staying at home, I should be boycotting, and I think me personally that would be the easy option to do just that" (BBC: Opening World Cup Broadcast, 2022). Lineker asked Scott: "Why are you here?" and Scott invoked a sense of journalism professionalism by replying: "Because I love my job and when I think about it sitting here and having the harder conversations, and its bigger isn't it, we're talking about migrant workers, the LGBTQ+ community, women's rights" (Wood, 2022).

However, Scott received criticism on social media. One tweet, liked 25,000 times, stated: "I love my job. And the f\*\*\*ing money" (Cohen, 2022). Sophie Corcoran, a broadcaster and Conservative Party activist, tweeted: "Not too long ago Alex Scott was trying to accuse the England women's team of structural racism and downplayed their victory (winning Euro 2022) due to there being too many white players. Now she's in Qatar – a country where gays, women and migrants have no rights. Talk about doing a 180". Scott drew attention to her journalistic

track record by tweeting back: “You are getting boring now with your tweets about me...my documentary ‘the future of the women’s game’ touches on so many subjects ranging from media rights, diversity, maternity rights and highlights the growth of the game. So stop with the lies and do one” (Marsh, 2022).

Scott did receive backing elsewhere in the media, though. *London Evening Standard* journalist Claire Cohen (2022) argued that Scott could better serve the public interest by being in Qatar where she could use her privileged voice as a national sports broadcaster to continue to raise issues rather than boycotting. Cohen also pointed out that Scott had more at stake than her BBC colleagues in being in a same-sex relationship because the decision to boycott for the others was based on “reputational rather than personal risk”. Cohen drew attention to how journalism professionalism can be interpreted in multiple ways to suit particular political interests or viewpoints. Cohen wrote, “No doubt had she refused to travel to the World Cup, there would have been people waiting to pounce and call her unprofessional, using it as proof that she wasn’t up to being a men’s football pundit as she couldn’t put aside her personal feelings. Too emotional, they’d have said”.

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## 3 Practitioner Metajournalistic Discourse

### 3.1 Impartiality and Independence

Alex Scott provoked further controversy once the tournament started by wearing a One Love rainbow armband, a symbol of protest against discrimination, during the broadcast of England’s opening match, a 6–2 win over Iran. Scott’s action was particularly salient as it came hours after England and Wales teams decided not to wear the armbands because FIFA threatened the issuing of yellow cards for breaches of its clothing rules (Waterson, 2022b).

Adam Sherwin (2022), in *the i paper*, noted that the BBC had not publicly backed Scott over the armband. Two years earlier, the BBC had issued new social media guidance reminding its employees that they needed to fulfil impartiality requirements by not voicing personal opinions on controversial issues (Sandhu, 2020). Sherwin’s article quoted a senior BBC figure as saying: “It’s a breach of impartiality although the cause is a good one. The problem is once presenters start wearing ‘campaigning’ items then it is very difficult to draw a line. That’s why a general rule has always been that they shouldn’t”. Sherwin pointed out that the BBC had previously defended Lineker’s outspokenness on social media because, as a sports presenter, he was not bound by the same rules as news journalists—however, these boundaries had been blurred in Qatar. Sherwin reported that the

BBC had refused to comment on whether Scott had been spoken to and stated that there was ‘nervousness’. Six months later, Scott gave an interview revealing that she escaped to Barbados after the World Cup because of the social media abuse and death threats (Manning, 2023).

While BBC sports broadcasters were unable to remain impartial in highlighting the moral issues at stake in covering Qatar 2022, they were still keen to assert their independence even though they were essentially broadcast partners of FIFA. Sports journalists’ professional discourse often involves a rebuttal of their ‘toy department’ reputation as they attempt to justify that they are not merely ‘fans with typewriters’ (Boyle, 2006) or have weak commitment to ethics (Oates & Pauly, 2007). The notion of sports journalists as cheerleaders (Boyle et al., 2009) troubles the occupational psyche and Lineker referenced this in a BBC interview when he stated: “We are here to report the World Cup and not support it. We’re not cheerleaders for it and that’s important” (BBC, 2022). Logan also adopted a detached position when she said: “I am going there as a broadcaster, and where the World Cup is held is not something any of us can influence” (Logan, 2022).

### 3.2 Positionality, Emotion and Empathy

Sports broadcasters effectively eschewed impartial positions to enable them to critique the World Cup and this also enabled a move from objective, detached takes on Qatar to more subjective, personal and emotive responses. Here, sports broadcasters could trade off their professional responsibilities against their personal position as a football fan and, in doing so, were signposting to television audiences how they should also feel about the tournament. Discourses here suggested that, for sports broadcasters, the hosting of the World Cup in Qatar had led to a diminished and sullied fan experience. Gabby Logan stated: “The controversies surrounding the regime there take some of that excitement away, and make me feel uncomfortable about the whole occasion” (Logan, 2022). Lineker added in a BBC interview with sports editor Dan Roan: “When there is a football match being played, I will be watching the football match but at the same time our thoughts will be with those who have lost their lives. How can you forget that?” (BBC, 2022).

Sports broadcasters also demonstrated empathy with oppressed and marginalised groups in Qatar. FIFA president Gianni Infantino claimed that he understood these positions as the son of Italian immigrants in Switzerland by saying: “Today I feel Arabic. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled. Today I feel (like) a migrant worker” (Ingle, 2022). However, Alex Scott retorted with an empathetic response in BBC’s opening broadcast to the tournament:

You will never know what it is like to be a migrant worker. To keep saying football is for everyone – it’s not. You can’t say football is for everyone... You are not gay, you’ll never understand travelling to a country where you are fearing for your life just because of your preference of who you choose to love (BBC: Opening World Cup Broadcast, 2022).

Gabby Logan referenced her own gender positionality when she said: “I hope female fans who are travelling to watch the tournament feel they can behave how they want to” (Logan, 2022). Further, Scott’s own positionality as being in a same-sex relationship meant that the act of wearing a rainbow One Love armband in Qatar placed her in an extremely vulnerable and precarious situation.

### 3.3 Combining Critique and Coverage

Sports broadcasters were self-conscious that their critical position would be seen as evaporating once the World Cup started. Lineker stated: “When the football starts you tend to stop talking about it. But that is how sportswashing works so you have to be careful” (BBC, 2022). Gabby Logan also reaffirmed a commitment to continued scrutiny by stating: “What we can also do during the next five weeks is shine a light on Qatar and its stance on issues like same-sex relationships, women’s rights and the treatment of migrant workers” (Logan, 2022). BBC pundit Ashley Williams stated in the BBC’s opening broadcast: “Human rights attention has never been at a higher level and we have a unique opportunity to talk about it” (BBC: Opening World Cup Broadcast, 2022).

Broadcasters pointed to both critique and coverage in the same sentence to clearly signpost that these tensions are reconcilable. The BBC prepared a briefing sheet for sports broadcasters to guide them in their responses to questions and this included: “The World Cup is happening in Qatar regardless of whether or not I attend. My role is to report on the football for the BBC where we will, of course, address topical issues relating to the tournament as part of our coverage” (Gill, 2022).

## 4 Conclusion

### 4.1 Summary –Political and Professional Metajournalistic Discourse

This chapter argues that the discourse surrounding sports broadcasters' approach to the 2022 Qatar World Cup was situated in the context of journalism professionalism. Two types of discourse emerged. The political discourse involved attacks on professional integrity, ethics and consistency, particularly in challenging sports broadcasters on hypocrisy in both critiquing and covering the World Cup. However, there was an inherent contradiction in this discourse in that it both argued sports broadcasters should boycott the tournament if they criticised Qatar but should also not criticise Qatar in the first place. Political discourse was confrontational and aggressive in character, which forced sports broadcasters to adopt defensive and reactive positions. Central to the sports broadcasters' argument was that they were in a better position to continue critiquing Qatar while being physically present at the World Cup because it would ensure the continued relevance, prominence and visibility of them and their voices.

The political discourse was reflective of the language and terminology in the right-wing culture wars rhetoric that perceives equality, diversity and inclusion issues as 'woke' and 'virtue-signalling'. This editorial agenda is strong in news organisations such as the *Daily Mail*, who were prominent in the political discourse that criticised sports broadcasters. However, more liberal news websites such as *The Independent* and *the I paper* supported the sports broadcasters' position.

The second type of discourse was practitioner rhetoric instigated by sports broadcasters themselves, which was designed to legitimate and secure public acceptance for the dual position of both critiquing and covering the World Cup. Here, sports broadcasters were prepared to eschew their impartiality obligations in favour of public-service ones that openly editorialised and criticised Qatar. In doing so, they stressed their independence from Qatar, FIFA and the tournament in general which enabled them to critique from distanced positions.

Sports broadcasters also used their positionality to inform their critique of the World Cup, such as Gabby Logan championing women's rights and Alex Scott raising awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. Aligned to this positionality was the expression of empathy towards marginalised groups, which was particularly prominent in the response to FIFA president Gianni Infantino's insensitive comments. The adoption of advocate positions in broadcasting, which cause tensions with codes of conduct, are arguable more palatable to audiences because of the journalistic turn

in the social media age towards subjective and confessional journalism (Coward, 2013).

There was a self-reflexivity in their own role as sports broadcasters in the sportswashing process, which they attempted to negate through regular criticism. The continued interchange between critiquing and covering the World Cup was also designed to mitigate the effects of sportswashing. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) argue the exercise of soft power is not a foregone conclusion at mega-events and negative media coverage can lead to ‘soft disempowerment’, which is a counter-productive state that leads to reputational damage for the host nation. BBC sports broadcasters’ approach to the World Cup in not showing the opening ceremony on its main channel and continual critique was designed to cause soft disempowerment.

#### **4.2 Paradigm Repair and Looking Forward to the 2026 World Cup**

Western sports broadcasters have been criticised for taking a biased position to the Qatar World Cup as they “used more negative sentiments, particularly anger and fear” (Daoudi et al., 2025, p. 18). However, the BBC’s Gary Lineker reflected on how critiquing Qatar 2022 was a form of paradigm repair for previous broadcast and journalistic failings at World Cups, specifically referencing Russia 2018. He stated:

I felt we were sportswashed in Russia. I don’t think the world stood up about what had happened in Crimea and I include ourselves in that. It didn’t seem like the world objected as much as they have done about Russia invading Ukraine. You learn lessons (BBC, 2022).

The challenge now for sports broadcasters is to be consistent and approach the 2026 World Cup in the US, Canada and Mexico with a similar critical eye to the Donald Trump presidency. However, if they do so, it is highly likely that similar political and practitioner discourses will play out to Qatar 2022 with professional approaches to sports broadcasting at the core of these debates.

Further, Gary Lineker lamented that, ultimately, the critical approach towards Qatar was unlikely to prompt significant structural change (BBC, 2022). FIFA’s awarding of the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia following an uncontested bidding process is likely to be a useful rain check on Middle Eastern attitudes and cultures to the LGBTQ+ community and migrant workers in the context of sports mega-events. However, the question lingers as to whether Qatar 2022 has led to a normalisation of sportswashing among the Gulf States and if there will be the same

appetite among sports broadcasters to take such a critical approach to Saudi Arabia in 2034.

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# How Much Is Too Much? Footballization and Agenda Diversity in European PSM Twitter Accounts During the Qatar 2022 World Cup

# 10

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## 1 Introduction

For Public Service Media (PSM), sport has long been considered an essential component to contribute “to the democratic, cultural and social wellbeing of society” (Picone & Donders, 2020, p. 348). By embodying the values of cultural citizenship, PSM have made use of sport to “bring communities and/or the nation together” (Smith, 2017, pp. 203–204), pursue “mass attention, and thereby, public legitimacy” (Lünich et al., 2021, p. 289) and expose major sporting events and showcase nationally-relevant practices through different formats and services (Ramon & Haynes, 2019; Scherer & Sam, 2012; Scherer & Whitson, 2009).

In the current landscape, PSM, sport, and cultural citizenship is undergoing a profound transformation. PSM’s ability to enhance cultural citizenship has been

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complicated by the significant tensions and pressures that arise from globalization, commodification, and shifting distribution technologies (Evens & Smith, 2022; Lotz & Eklund, 2024). These include decreasing advertising revenues, severe budget cuts, and growing competition from pay-TV channels, Internet-distributed video, and on-demand platforms (Hesmondhalgh & Lotz, 2020; Połońska & Beckett, 2019).

However, in this challenging context, PSM can utilize its myriad platforms and services to transcend the constraints of linear broadcasting and find alternative ways of advancing cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2020). Digital spaces provide new opportunities for PSM to promote an inclusive coverage that gives a broader recognition to those areas, topics, and voices that are “often neglected by the commercial media” (Cwynar, 2017, p. 135). New destinations can help PSM to provide “variation in content” (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2023, p. 2576) and offer a diverse coverage that lends visibility to “traditionally underrepresented sports and protagonists, including sportswomen and athletes with disabilities” (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, p. 919).

Nevertheless, as shown by previous research, these opportunities are not always met. Across countries, PSM routine agenda on social media is overwhelmingly dominated by football, leaving little space for other disciplines, events, and protagonists to be showcased in the day-to-day coverage (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021). Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon (2021) examined the sports agenda diversity offered on Twitter by four European PSM—RTVE (Spain), France TV (France), RAI (Italy), and RTÉ (Ireland)—and revealed that 30–58% of the output offered by those accounts during 3 months was football-related. A subsequent analysis of the sports-centered Twitter account of the BBC followed a similar pattern: 62.09% of the messages posted over 3 months by @BBCSport were exclusively devoted to football (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022). Football-centrism was also evident in the Twitter coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics offered by European PSM companies. During the event, public corporations in countries such as Belgium or The Netherlands favored football-driven content related to domestic football leagues and international qualifying matches in front of Paralympic-themed tweets (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2023).

While the cultural importance and global consumption of football cannot be denied (Petersen-Wagner & Lee Ludvigsen, 2023), the increasing ‘footballization’ of content raises important concerns about “the concentration of symbolic power in the digital age” (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, p. 933). In this context, further questions come to light: To what extent does the process of ‘footballization’ intensify during major mega-events such as the World Cup? What are the implications of such football-centrism? Does PSM’s coverage on social media engage with key

issues of social and political nature, such as the human rights issues surrounding the latest edition of the tournament? Bearing these questions in mind, this chapter endeavors to expand the relevant literature on the agenda diversity in sports journalism and examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 by six European PSM companies.

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## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Agenda Diversity in Sports Journalism and the Footballization of Content**

The construction of the agenda mainly depends on the relationship between journalists and sources (McCombs, 2014), apart from their professional background and personal preferences, which may introduce some “fundamental biases” in the account of facts and events (Fuller, 1996). According to several authors, sports journalism has historically been a subfield regarded as escapist and apolitical (Serazio, 2019). In this insularity (Rowe, 2007), reporters tend to avoid larger contextual issues and problematic areas in their coverage to be more focused on what happens inside sports venues.

However, ‘stick to sports’ long-held mandate journalism throughout decades during the past century in American sports journalism (Broussard, 2020) has been overtaken by the development of events in the news ecosystem. As other niches of journalism, sports media needed to adjust to changes resulting from the technology of the field (Perreault & Bell, 2022) and had no choice but to quit from “an ideological safe space” (Moritz, 2019, para. 6) to better connect with an audience who is ever more aware of those sensitive social and political issues such as inequality, racism, gender roles or governance around competitions and their protagonists. For them, leaving behind ‘stick to sports’ means bringing the audience closer to the complete understanding of what is happening and, thus, fulfilling the mission for which they were called (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019).

Likewise, the practice of sports journalism has been noted for handling a scarce and repetitive number of sources and it appears to be limited by the frequent uniformity presented by its stories (English, 2018). Despite being sports a very complex and diverse field that encompasses almost a hundred international federations under the umbrella of the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF), mainstream sports media seem to perpetuate the hegemonic coverage of major events and the most popular athletes (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). Mainstream sports outlets establish a hierarchy of priorities that results “in saturation coverage

of a small number of sports and the advanced neglect of most others, despite their substantial popular support bases” (Rowe, 2007, p. 400). This is especially the case of football, the content that overwhelmingly dominates the sports agenda leaving little space for other disciplines, tournaments, and voices to be represented in the male-centered day-to-day coverage (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021).

The ‘footballization’ of sports journalism (Rojas-Torrijos, 2012) leads to a considerable lack of diversity in the news coverage preventing most sports media outlets from tackling broader issues around competitions, exploring and cultivating niches, and serving communities of interest that remain neglected in the media (Domeneghetti, 2021). This “narrowing effect” of sports-related output has been reinforced in digital and social media platforms, where the topics published tend to be those that have been clicked on most by users (Seeger et al., 2023).

While the cultural importance and global consumption of football cannot be denied in the platform society (Petersen-Wagner & Lee Ludvigsen, 2023), the increasing ‘footballization’ of content raises important concerns about “the concentration of symbolic power in the digital age” (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, p. 933), the degree of intensification of ‘footballization’ during major mega-events such as the World Cup and the implications of such football-centrism.

## **2.2 The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022: Media Narratives in the Run-Up to the Event**

Meier et al. (2021, p. 791) highlight that “sporting mega events, almost without exceptions, produce some negative side effects—social frictions, ecological damage, and the waste of public funds [...] negative side effects receive more attention and resonance in Western media, when the hosting country is non-Western”. Focusing on the Rio 2016 Olympics, Lünich et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis of two German PSM (ARD and ZDF) television broadcasts and found out that “a substantial amount of coverage was dedicated to sociopolitical issues addressing the problematic facets of the event” (Lünich et al., 2021, p. 300). As the authors emphasize, while both broadcasters “also served the need for escapism, enjoyment, and human-interest topics, such entertaining aspects were not used to cover up the problems plaguing the competitions” (Lünich et al., 2021, p. 300).

The FIFA World Cup celebrated in Qatar in 2022 turned out to one of the most controversial mega-events ever, especially after the corrupt bidding contest revealed in ‘FIFA Files’ investigation series by *The Sunday Times* in 2014 (Blake & Calvert, 2015). In addition, this Middle East country was under international scrutiny arising from human rights concerns regarding migrant workers on build-

ing the event stadia (Al Thani, 2021) and even faced the allegations of causing several hundred deaths of them on projects related to the World Cup (Pattisson & McIntyre, 2021).

Beyond the competition, western media and human rights advocacy groups (Dubinsky, 2023) regarded Qatar 2022 a paradigmatic case of ‘sportswashing’ (Ganji, 2023). This is an increasing practice of using sports (Boykoff, 2022), usually through hosting an event or owning a club (Fruh et al., 2023), as “a means by which a country can deflect audiences’ attention away from less favourable perceptions” (Chadwick, 2022, p. 12). Sportswashing is a “soft diplomacy tool” (Papanikos, 2023, p. 123) that helped Qatar to cover up domestic issues such as extensive poverty, limited press freedom, human rights abuses against migrant workers or discriminative policies against women and the LGBTQ community (Bettine & Ozdemir, 2023). This form of ‘soft power’ projection (Sutherland, 2022) was also applied to improve the image of the host country abroad (Skey, 2023), enlarge its international significance within international affairs (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022) and increase sympathies for the entire Arab world (Gläsel et al., 2024).

The background behind Qatar hosting 2022 World Cup and the controversies surrounding the regime and its human rights record was a key talking point within sports journalism before the tournament started (Logan, 2022). Thus, Qatar received many such criticisms by the international mass media, that could draw people’s attention to what was happening and what needed to be changed in Qatar far beyond stadia. This situation led media outlets such as *The Athletic* to cover the World Cup not only delivering scores and reporting about press conferences but also navigating the moral issues around the event (Kay-Jelski, 2022). *The Athletic* decided “to highlight the voices of those who made the World Cup happen” (Whitehead, 2022, para. 7) and, with the help of human rights researchers Equidem, four migrant workers in Qatar documented their lives in a diary throughout the tournament as the football unfolds.

Social and political issues were also guiding lines in the news coverage of Qatar’s World Cup made by British newspapers. According to Owen-Jones (2022), despite their coverage was mostly negative, showing that human rights issues are relevant and newsworthy to some media outlets, they tended to frame everything that happened in the Gulf state through the prism of the global sports mega-event.

### 3 Method

This chapter examines the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 by six European PSM companies: RTVE (Spain), France TV (France), ZDF (Germany), RTBF (Belgium), NOS (Netherlands), and TVP (Poland). Three research questions guided the study:

- RQ1. What was the volume and frequency of content on the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 published by European PSM companies on Twitter? What engagement figures (retweets and favorites) were obtained by those publications?
- RQ2. What agenda was delivered by European PSM companies during the event? Beyond Qatar 2022, what was the space devoted in Twitter to other sports and protagonists?
- RQ3. What was the coverage devoted to human rights issues around Qatar 2022 in the PSM Twitter timelines?

All the studied PSM companies created their sports-centered Twitter accounts between 2009 and 2010, except for RTVE, which created its profile *@deportes\_rtve* in 2014. As of December 2022, the most prolific accounts had been *@RTBFsport* and *@francetvsport*, followed by *@sport\_tvppl* and *@NOSsport*. *@Sportstudio* (ZDF) had the highest number of followers (628,885), followed by the Twitter accounts held by PSM in the Netherlands, France, and Poland (Table 10.1).

The tweets published by these PSM companies during the timeframe of the Qatar 2022 World Cup (20 November 2022–18 December 2022) were analyzed. Posts were retrieved using Twitonomy (<http://twitonomy.com>), a web-based software program created by Digitonomy, which facilitated the access to data via Twitter's application programming interface (API). This specialized tool was extensively employed in scholarly research on sports communication (Grimmer & Horky, 2018; Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021) but ceased to work after the implementation of changes in Twitter's API policies in 2023. To ensure the retrieval of all the content published during the analyzed timeframe, data were extracted on 19 December 2022. The total number of downloaded tweets was  $N = 5777$ .

Once the Twitter posts were downloaded, they were processed using Microsoft Excel and examined through content analysis. As noted by Clark et al. (2021, p. 272), "quantitative content analysis is an approach to analyzing documents and texts that aims to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories in a way that is systematic and replicable". This research technique was chosen considering

**Table 10.1** Contextual data about the accounts examined

	@deportes_rtve	@francetvsport	@sportstudio	@RTBFsport	@NOSsport	@sport_tvppl
Tweets	74,391	157,638	63,753	186,147	98,105	135,564
Following	227	1337	1496	1058	80	1425
Followers	96,844	294,681	628,885	138,866	380,535	211,878
Joined Twitter	22/5/14	4/5/10	16/1/09	1/12/09	22/12/10	22/1/10
Followers/following	426	220	420	131	4756	148
Listed/1000 followers	4.62	6.35	3	4.76	4.18	2.24

Source: Authors' own elaboration with data extracted from Twitonomy

core advantages such as its transparency, unobtrusiveness, and adaptability to different media forms including social media (Clark et al., 2021).

By using a set of exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories, we applied this technique to tweets published by PSM companies on their sports-centered Twitter accounts to contrast the research questions (RQ1–RQ3) with the empirical data obtained. Informed by previous research on PSM, sport and agenda diversity on Twitter (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021), a content analysis codebook was devised. The codebook included the following variables: date of publication; retweet count; favorite count; World Cup-themed tweet or not; sports covered; gender of protagonists; and focus on human issues and other contextual aspects surrounding Qatar 2022 or not.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Volume, Frequency of Publication, and Engagement (RQ1)

The comparative analysis of  $N = 5777$  tweets revealed the extensive attention devoted by European PSM to this major event. In the aggregate, 87.97% ( $n = 5082$ ) of the messages focused on the World Cup. Content on Qatar 2022 exceeded 90% of the output published by @deportes\_rtve and @sport\_tvpl. In other accounts such as @francetvsport, @NOSsport, @sportstudio, and @RTBFsport, this content ranged between 69.44% and 88.13% (Table 10.2).

With regards to the frequency of publication, it should be highlighted that @deportes\_rtve published 56.52 tweets per day on the FIFA 2022 World Cup. The Polish broadcaster @sport\_tvpl offered 42.83 World Cup-themed tweets on average per day, closely followed by @RTBFsport (40.69). These accounts greatly

**Table 10.2** Volume and frequency of the analyzed tweets

Account	Country	Tweets	$N$ WC22	% WC22	WC22 tweets/day
@francetvsport	France	576	400	69.44%	13.79
@deportes_rtve	Spain	1696	1639	96.64%	56.52
@sportstudio (ZDF)	Germany	293	233	79.52%	8.03
@NOSsport	Netherlands	537	388	72.25%	13.38
@sport_tvpl	Poland	1336	1242	92.96%	42.83
@RTBFsport	Belgium	1339	1180	88.13%	40.69
	<b>Total</b>	<b>5777</b>	<b>5082</b>	<b>87.97%</b>	<b>175.24</b>

Source: Authors' own elaboration

capitalized on the ‘nowness’ of sports (Rowe, 2018), offering a continuous stream of information consisting of minute-by-minute updates of events, live scores, and World Cup-themed news. As it can be seen on Table 10.3, during the timeframe of the study, the following accounts engaged unevenly with Twitter users, both in terms of retweets and favorites.

#### 4.2 Diversity of the Agenda: Sports and Protagonists Beyond Qatar 2022 (RQ2)

For nearly 1 month, the overabundance of football-related content came at the expense of other high-profile and minority sports, competitions, and protagonists, who indeed became media ‘blind spots’ (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2023) as they did not receive the wider visibility that social networking sites can easily afford.

To illustrate, if we take the case of *@deportes\_rtve* in Spain, we can see that only 57 out of 1696 tweets published by the account were not focused on the Qatar 2022 World Cup. Those 57 posts featured 10 tweets on football and 47 on other disciplines (athletics, basketball, cycling, golf, handball, hockey, motorsport, tennis, waterpolo, and wheelchair tennis), which were barely visible: combined, these disciplines only accounted for 2.77% of *@deportes\_rtve*’s content during the studied timeframe. Looking at gender, it can be seen that only 20 posts across the sample were devoted to sportswomen (1.17%). Athletes with disabilities were virtually inexistent across the board, as they were only featured in three publications in *@deportes\_rtve*’s output (0.18%).

Another relevant case in point is *@sportstudio* (ZDF). The sporting menu offered by the account beyond Qatar 2022 (60 tweets) was mainly restricted to domestic football (11 tweets) and winter sports (37 tweets), which together accounted for 80% of the tweets not focused on the World Cup. Other disciplines (motorsport, boxing, darts, and tennis) were barely covered in *@sportstudio*’s timeline. In total, only 12 out of 293 posts published during the examined period (4.10%) were focused on sportswomen. Only 2 publications devoted to athletes with disabilities (0.68%) were featured by *@sportstudio* during the observation timeframe.

Diverging observations can be made about the agenda diversity exhibited by *@francetvsport*, an account that during the examined timeframe devoted more than 30% of its output to non-Qatar topics (176 out of 576 tweets). In a first level of analysis, the French broadcaster departed from the limited range of sports exposed by other outlets. The account incorporated more than 25 sports in its Twitter timeline, including minority and alternative disciplines such as biathlon, fencing, breakdance, judo or skydiving. In a second level of inquiry, however, it should be

**Table 10.3** Engagement figures of the analyzed tweets

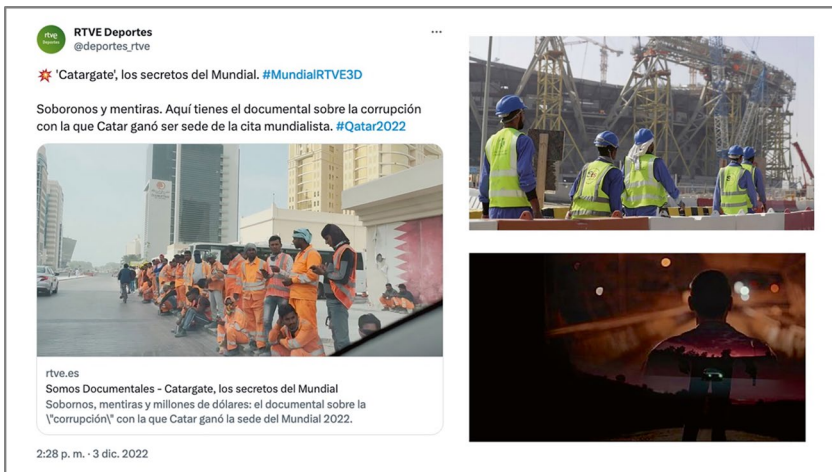
	@deportes_rtw	@francetvsport	@sportstudio	@RTBFsport	@NOSsport	@sport_tvppl
Tweets retweeted	734	440	216	215	365	958
% of tweets being retweeted	43.28	76.39	73.72	16.06	67.97	71.71
Total number of retweets	1819	2018	672	406	2409	18,657
Retweets per retweeted tweet	2.48	4.59	3.11	1.89	6.60	19.47
Retweets/100 followers	1.88	0.68	0.11	0.29	0.63	8.81
Tweets favorited	985	559	290	1070	527	1172
% of tweets being favorited	58.08	97.05	98.98	79.91	98.14	87.72
Total number of favorites	5086	12,856	8527	3302	23,763	391,202
Favorites per favorited tweet	5.16	23	29.40	3.09	45.09	333.79

Source: Authors' own elaboration with data extracted from Twitonomy

noted that most of the attention was driven to rugby and swimming (81 tweets combined) and particularly, to big tournaments such as the Champions Cup, the Challenge Cup and the 2022 FINA World Swimming Championships. Notably, only 31 posts made by *@francetvsport* were exclusively devoted to sportswomen (5.38%). Only three publications—focused on paratriathlon and wheelchair tennis—engaged with athletes with disabilities (0.52%).

### 4.3 Attention to Human Rights Issues Around Qatar 2022 (RQ3)

As Meier et al. (2021, p. 790) notes, “the World Cup is a paramount example for a contested event, where different and opposing interpretations are grappling for ascendancy”. Despite the continuous stream of information on the World Cup, human rights issues around Qatar 2022 (Al Thani, 2021; Gläbel et al., 2024; Samuel-Azran et al., 2023) were largely overlooked in PSM timelines during the event. Spanish broadcaster *@deportes\_rtve* was the only organization across the sample that explicitly published a tweet about the dark side of the Qatar 2022 organization through the promotion of the documentary ‘Catargate, the secrets of the World Cup’. This 54-min audiovisual work, directed by Stephane Fort, was focused on “corruption with which Qatar won to host the World Cup event” (Fig. 10.1).



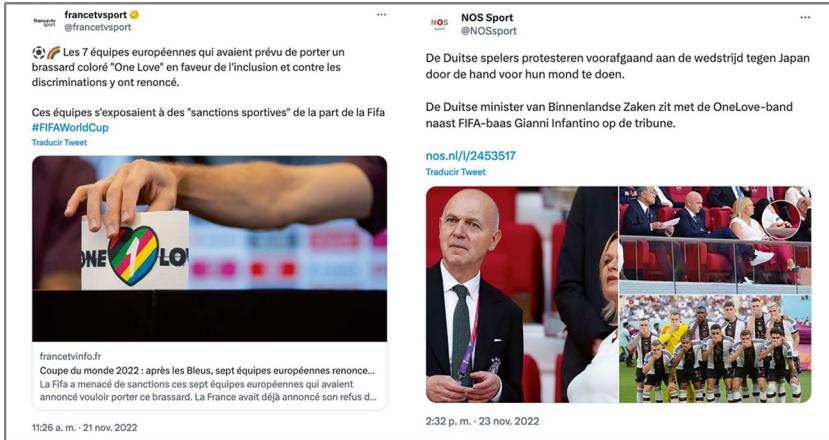
**Fig. 10.1** Post published by *@deportes\_rtve* on the documentary ‘Catargate’

Both *@deportes\_rtve* and *@RTBFsport* criticized how FIFA’s president Gianni Infantino “whitewashes Qatar” and became the “official gravedigger of the reputation of FIFA and football” (Fig. 10.2). The Spanish broadcaster linked to its website, where users could find a short video (1 min and 17 seconds) with highlights of Infantino’s press conference. The video emphasized that FIFA only recognized four deaths in the construction of Qatar stadiums and provided additional data of the number of deaths according to diverse stakeholders: the Qatar 2022 organizing committee (400–500), *The Guardian* (6500) and Amnesty International (15,021). In its turn, the Belgian broadcaster directed users to a news article where they criticized Infantino to do “everything to maintain a good image with Qatar” (Deby, 2022a, para. 1). The article concluded that “football, through the decisions of its main leader, will see its image further damaged” (Deby, 2022a, para. 7).

Most of the examined outlets briefly reflected on the controversy surrounding the ‘One Love’ LGBTQ Rights Armband (Fig. 10.3), which indeed illuminated the everlasting relationship between sport and politics. To illustrate, *@francetvsport* linked to an article published in where it was explained that “the seven European teams (Denmark, England, Netherlands, Wales, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland) who had planned to wear a colored “One Love” armband in favor of inclusion and against discrimination finally gave up on Monday 21 November facing the threat of “sporting sanctions” during the World Cup in Qatar” (France Télévisions, 2022, para. 1). *@RTBFsport* also redirected users to a news piece that



**Fig. 10.2** Examples of critical coverage towards FIFA’s president Gianni Infantino published by *@deportes\_rtve* and *@RTBFsport*



**Fig. 10.3** Examples of coverage on the ‘One Love’ armband controversy published by @francetvsport and @NOSsport

explained that Nancy Faeser, German Minister of the Interior and Community “was seen right next to Gianni Infantino with the famous “One Love” armband on her left arm.” (Deby, 2022b, para. 3). As noted by the Belgian broadcaster, “Germany demonstrates here all the opposition it has against FIFA’s decisions and demonstrates its support for the LGBT + community, not treated very well in Qatar” (Deby, 2022b, para. 3).

Other ‘negative’ issues beyond the playing field were largely ignored in the PSM Twitter timelines during the celebration of the event. Media scantily reflected on the deaths of the US journalist Grant Wahl (who was previously detained in Qatar after he wore a rainbow shirt in the game between USA and Wales), the ITV’s technical director Roger Pearce, and of a World Cup security guard while on duty at the Lusail Stadium.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

This research endeavoured to examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 by six European PSM companies. In line with previous research, this study demonstrates that social media platforms offer new opportunities to provide timely sports content and engage with new audiences (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021). The exten-

sive and consistent coverage of the Qatar 2022 World Cup deployed by PSM in Twitter indeed facilitated publics' understanding of the development of the tournament. Nevertheless, the approach followed by these organizations holds important implications for the discussion on the sports agenda diversity in the digital age.

Previous research indicated that PSM sports coverage on social media “reinforces, rather than counteracts, the long-standing diversity imbalances present in the analogue age” (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022, p. 290). During the World Cup timeframe, the long-lasting inequalities in the sports journalism agenda on social media (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2023; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021) were broadened and intensified in considerable manners. For nearly a month, the prominent space devoted by PSM in the daily round to football turned into an almost exclusive ‘footballization’ of the sports menu offered to audiences across European countries (RQ1). This narrow approach is not without consequences, as football-centrism was at the expense of other disciplines, competitions, and protagonists, who were rendered almost invisible in PSM Twitter timelines (RQ2). In addition, such concentration also contributed to dilute the limited exposure that sportswomen and athletes with disabilities already have in social media sports output. The underrepresentation of those groups has far-reaching implications, as it conveys the message that sports media remains a masculine and able-bodied domain (Meier et al., 2017; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021).

As Hayes and Karamichas (2012) point out, “sports mega-events are not simply sporting events, but have profound political, economic, social and cultural consequences” (p. 251). According to Boyle (2006), “at its best, sports journalism is about making sense of the wider context within which events have occurred” (p. 143). In this regard, PSM coverage of the World Cup in social media was not without limitations. The bulk of content published by PSM on Twitter focused on the Qatar 2022 sporting competition and did not delve into the larger framework of the World Cup, including human rights aspects and issues of social, economic, political, and environmental nature surrounding the event (Al Thani, 2021; Blake & Calvert, 2015; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Dubinsky, 2023; Gläfel et al., 2024; Pattisson & McIntyre, 2021).

Beyond isolated examples of critical coverage displayed by organizations such as *@deportes\_rtve* and *@RTBFsport*, during the event, PSM conformed to the “festive zeitgeist” (Boykoff, 2014, p. 94) and overlooked controversial issues (RQ3). In mega-events such as the Olympics or the World Cup, critical media discourses displayed in the run-up to the tournaments largely tend to get eclipsed once sporting competition gets underway. As Lünich et al. (2021) reveal, critical coverage does not necessarily resonate with audiences, who might prefer entertainment and sport-driven coverage rather than contextual and problematic approaches to

mega-events. On social media platforms, the popularity of political-themed and critical tweets during tournaments can be limited, as illustrated by Meier et al.'s (2021) analysis of Twitter messages surrounding the 2018 FIFA World Cup held in Russia. However, considering that the purpose of sports journalism should be "to critically examine sports, from the play to the politics behind the play" (King, 2008, p. 341), arguably a sustained coverage of the socio-political context should have been central to PSM's approach throughout Qatar 2022.

Despite that the conditioning factors and trade-offs linked to the commercial nature of social networking sites cannot be overlooked (Steiner et al., 2019), PSM should ask themselves 'How much is too much': Is it acceptable to embrace football-centrism to such extent and leave many other sports and protagonists out of the limelight? To what extent are PSM fulfilling their mission and contributing to democratic wellbeing if they "shy away from reporting on complex issues" (Domeneghetti, 2021, p. 176) and primarily 'stick to sports' when competitions get underway?

The diversity imbalances observed here raise important questions for the construction of cultural citizenship in the digital age. As Antunovic and Bartolucci (2023) remind us, "the media do not simply reflect values of society, but play an important role in determining which sports, stories, and voices become dominant" (p. 169). Additionally, as Morlandstø and Mathisen (2023) contend, media 'blind spots' "have implications for democracy, citizenship and public sphere" (p. 2578). Preliminary results signal the need for PSM to rethink its social media strategies to provide a more balanced coverage that adequately contributes to enhancing cultural citizenship in the digital age.

Despite that this work has examined the Twitter coverage by different PSM organizations during Qatar 2022, the study presents limitations that open fertile avenues for subsequent research. First, future analysis on the sports agenda diversity on social media should consider broadening the range of organizations under scrutiny while incorporating other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. Second, future studies should observe the patterns of continuity and change in the 'footballization' of digital sports media content.

To this end, attention should be placed in both PSM routine coverage and the coverage that will be developed in the forthcoming editions of the World Cup: 2026 (to be hosted by Mexico, Canada, and the United States) and 2030 (to be held in Morocco, Portugal, and Spain). Third, further research would benefit from applying other methods such as in-depth interviews with PSM decision-makers and social media editors. Such approach would be valuable to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the practices, strategies, motivations, and challenges involved in the production, coverage, and dissemination of sports through digital platforms.

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# #LoveisLove and #Equalpay? A Content Analysis of German Athletes' Self-Representation Compared to Media Coverage During the 2022 UEFA Women's Euro and the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup

Lena Zils and Thomas Birkner

## 1 Introduction

Wearing the rainbow or pride flag as a captain's armband; kneeling for equality just before kick-off; discussing the political situation in the host countries of major tournaments: political imagery, messages, and debates in the world of football have increased in recent years (Nieland, 2023). When restrictions against these political messages are, for example, imposed by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and protests against these restrictions are organized, the resulting uproar is covered by the news media. Negativity and conflict serve as a central news factor here (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020).

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Athletes do generally benefit from increased media attention; for example, increased exposure can generate new fans or contribute to money earned from endorsement deals (Bertling & Schierl, 2020). The growing significance of media with regard to institutional and cultural practices in different spheres of society—stated briefly, the mediatization of these practices (Hjarvard, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2016)—has been studied as “social and cultural changes that are defined as long-term structural transformations in other social and cultural fields” (Frandsen, 2016, p. 386). Other work has focused on mediatization as collective and individual actors using news media services to serve their own needs (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014).

However, with a strong focus on political issues, athletes’ performances fade into the background. This is especially significant in the context of women’s football, as female athletes not only receive fewer overall media attention than their male counterparts (Cooky et al., 2021; Denham, 2022; Pfister, 2015), but they also tend to face sexist patterns in news coverage (Nieland, 2021; Petty & Pope, 2019; Pfister, 2015; Shugart, 2003).

Social media provides an opportunity for marginalized athletes to represent themselves as legitimate and serious athletes (Bruce, 2016). Using “bypassing strategies” (Nölleke & Birkner, 2019), female football players’ social media engagement allows them to shed light on the sporting event itself rather than on the political discourse portrayed by journalistic actors. However, while there is a strong body of literature on athletes’ self-presentation, the online behavior of female athletes during major sporting events remains underexplored (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018).

In addition, the differences between athletes’ self-representation on their social media accounts and corresponding news coverage in terms of political messages have, to this point, received far too little attention. Therefore, the specific aim of this study was to examine these differences during the Women’s European Championship and the Men’s World Cup. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these tournaments took place in the same year (2022), and both were politically charged, which offered the opportunity for a high degree of comparability. Moreover, mega-sporting events often exemplify trends in mediatization and draw attention to political issues (Nieland, 2021; Petty & Pope, 2019).

Due to the pandemic, the 2021 Women’s European Championship was postponed until the summer of 2022. The German team played a successful tournament; they reached the final before losing to the host country, England. The final broke the attendance record for the Women’s European Championship, and the match was the highest rated TV match in Germany in 2022.

In the lead-up to the men's tournament in Qatar, Germany became embroiled in a heated debate around boycotting the tournament due to human rights violations in the host country. Some European teams, including Germany, hoped to express their awareness by wearing a "one love" armband. However, when FIFA officials announced they would punish teams that expressed political messages, the German team abandoned the armband and instead emphasized FIFA's censorship by holding their hands over their mouths during the team photo. Regardless of their political expression, the team failed to progress beyond the group stage, thus falling short of achieving their sporting goal.

In this study, we have used content analysis to examine how members of the German women's and men's football teams presented themselves on Instagram compared to how the corresponding tournament and their performances were presented by the predominant German sports news outlets on the same platform. In particular, we have examined how political messages were presented by both the news outlets and the athletes. The interrelations between sports and media can be researched with the concept of mediatization.

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## 2 Mediatization of Sports

As a broad and widely used theoretical concept in communication studies, mediatization refers to an "increasing importance and influence of media" (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a, p. 244; 2014b, p. 246) in modern societies. This growing importance and influence can be understood from two different angles. On the one hand, a wider understanding of media allows mediatization to be understood as the ways in which new media technologies and new communication devices permeate everyday life. An example of the mediatization of sports (Frandsen, 2020) from this perspective is how a "previously non-media-related activity – fitness – is supplemented and partly replaced by media technology and formats" (Pfadenhauer & Grenz, 2012, p. 101).

On the other hand, through a narrower understanding of media, the impact of journalistic mass media coverage on politics, science, sports, and other social systems can also be understood as mediatization (Neuberger, 2023). Research in this area has a long tradition, especially regarding political communication, usually focusing on politics being dominated, or even colonized, by the media (Meyer, 2002; Strömbäck, 2008). In the world of sports, this observation has not taken on such a pessimistic tone, as the "sacred union" (Real, 1975, p. 32) of sports and media attention is generally accepted. Football's European Champions League or cycling's Tour de France, for example, are media inventions (Frandsen, 2014,

p. 531), and their success as sporting events is connected inseparably with the attention they gain through mass media exposure.

With the modern growth of social media, a new wave of the mediatization of sports was initiated (Frandsen, 2016), and it is important that research in this area connects, theoretically and empirically, the concept of social actors adapting to the changes in mass media (Nölleke et al., 2021) with their ability to circumvent journalism via social media (Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). These platforms have become “gamechangers” in the field of sports (and other fields) by providing organizations, clubs, and athletes with their own communication channels (Horky et al., 2017). The impact of the media, which had already been observed in professional sports like tennis (Küpper et al., 2022), has entered a new stage. In the special issue of *Communication and Sport*, the editors of “Sport and Mediatization: Sports Events and Cultures Across the World” state:

The spread of the internet, the emergence of social media, and the expansion of mobile media resulted in mediated communication having become almost omnipresent and affecting individual and organizational life in sport much more than in the past. (Ličen et al., 2022, p. 795)

They also highlight the fact that “the continued gender bias of mass media must be expected to underpin different processes of mediatization in women’s and men’s sports” (Ličen et al., 2022, p. 795). We believe that integrating both traditions of mediatization into a joint research design will provide a broader picture of these different processes of mediatization in women’s and men’s football.

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## 3 Literature Review

### 3.1 Sports and Gender Differences

Several studies have already examined the development of gender-biased mediatization and framing. For example, Beck and Bosshart (2003) emphasize that:

Since sports descended from hunting and from the fitness that was and still is important for being successful in the fight for survival, some hold that sports manifest a hegemonic masculinity and that the roles of women as both sports reporters and athletes threaten that hegemony. But this situation is changing. ... Sport is no longer a male religion! (p. 16)

The fact remains, however, that female athletes are not treated the same as their male counterparts; they also enjoy fewer benefits from the developments of mediatization, and women's sports generally receive much less attention than men's sports. In a longitudinal content analysis of US sports media over the last 25 years, Cooky et al. (2021) showed that female athletes are largely underrepresented in sports coverage. While their number of appearances remains low, having not changed significantly over the years, the frames through which they are presented have developed. Until the turn of the century, women were subjected to overly sexist and humor-tinged coverage of their sports performance. While Cooky et al. did note a shift toward less offensive coverage in the early 2000s, during this period female athletes were still primarily perceived in conservative and heteronormative ways—as wives, girlfriends, or mothers. From 2014 onwards, Cooky et al. observed what they called “gender-bland sexism,” in which female athletes, unlike their male counterparts, were “normally presented in bland and boring ways.... In contrast, viewers of stories about men's sports were constantly immersed in a sea of colorful and dominant verbal descriptors, delivered in excited and widely modulated voice intonations” (p. 359). These findings are in line with the status quo with regard to different disciplines and contexts (e.g., Denham, 2022; Pfister, 2015; Sherwood et al., 2019).

Hence, although sport is a highly mediatized field, it is male athletes who tend to benefit from this development. Women, meanwhile, are not only left out, but also framed in a sexist and unequal way.

Football is not only the most popular sport in Europe—it is also a prominent field of research, especially in combination with mediatization. Meyen (2014) provided an overview of the mediatization of football at the micro, meso, and macro levels. On the micro level, he investigated media training, the dynamization of football, the media's affinity for potential new players, and players' awareness of pervasive camera observation on the pitch—during goal celebrations, for example. At the meso level, Meyen discussed the professionalization of football clubs' public relations, and at the macro level, he noted that even the rulebook was adapted to certain media logics. Other scholars have examined the autobiographies of football players, finding that athletes not only perceive the media, but they also use it for their own benefit (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016). This work also identified gender differences: while men tend to criticize the media (especially the tabloid media) for observing them incessantly, women complain more about being underrepresented in the media.

Football dominates news coverage and research in Europe, and this is especially true with regard to men's football. However, since women's football does, at times, appear in the public eye, for example when it breaks spectator records (e.g., BBC

Sport, 2022), in the past years, more studies have made it a focus: women's football has become a "symbol of and driving force for gender equality in sport and beyond" (Pfister, 2015, p. 564).

Pfister (2015) identified the beginning of research on women's football in the 2003 special issue of *Soccer and Society*. A number of early studies of fundamental importance compared the emergence of women's football in different countries and identified barriers such as stereotypes and the notion of femininity. Another special issue of *Soccer and Society* in 2011 broadened the field of research by examining non-playing roles in football, such as coaches, and their perceptions of gender, sexuality, and identity. While research into women's football coverage began in the early 2000s, research on news coverage of women's football remains scarce. The existing body of research suggests that news coverage of women's football contains sexist patterns such as passive objectification, enforced heterosexuality or sexualization of players' performances on the pitch (Shugart, 2003), emphasis on femininity and beauty (Pfister, 2015), and even discusses "whether that accomplishment [winning the 2019 FIFAWWC] merits space on an American newspaper's front page" (Bell & Coche, 2022, p. 1147). It has been argued that the aforementioned discrimination against women's football is driven by differences in athletic performance. However, in an experimental study, Gomez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) revealed that participants gave higher ratings to the performance of male players only when they knew they were watching men's football. When the gender of the players is obscured by blurring, however, the participants' ratings of the players' performances in video clips of elite female and male football did not differ significantly. Therefore, it is not the quality of the athletic performance, but rather, gender bias that plays a major role in the reception of sport.

On the other hand, Petty and Pope (2019) argued that with the 2015 World Cup, there "has been a shift towards more positive coverage of women's sport" (p. 499), as the event was perceived in a largely positive way. Their work, however, also identified that comparison of female players to male players—for example, regarding their salaries—as a prevalent theme in this more positive coverage. In our view, this overshadows the female players' achievements. Petty and Pope discussed this point in their study, concluding that:

We recognize that by using the men's game to frame and measure women's success, it could be argued that the women's team are being judged against an established 'male' standard and that this may serve to trivialize the achievements of female athletes.... Thus, in contrast to previous research we suggest that these gender comparisons could be viewed positively by assisting readers and potential fans to develop a connection with female players. (p. 495)

They also postulated that the 2015 FIFA World Cup coverage was a turning point, stating that “perhaps for the first time, media coverage around this mega-event reported on sport as sport, whereby the gender of the athlete was largely irrelevant” (Petty & Pope, 2019, p. 499). We would argue, however, that gender can only become irrelevant when women’s football is perceived as a sport in its own right, rather than being consistently compared to men’s football. In line with this, Leflay and Biscomb (2021) noted increased media coverage and more positive and authentic portrayals of female football players since 2017, and Díaz McConnell et al. (2022) observed that coverage on the U.S. Women’s National Team during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup revolved around their talent, hard work, success, and political activism (see Petty & Pope 2023 too).

A large number of studies have investigated news coverage of football, but these have had a clear focus on men’s mega-sporting events. While a positive trend in the coverage of women’s football has been observed, particularly in terms of the amount of coverage during mega-sporting events, there remains a lack of equality in the presentation of female athletes compared to their male counterparts.

### 3.2 Politicization of Sports

“Politicisation, in a broad and basic understanding, means to turn something – an issue, an institution, a policy – that previously was not a subject to political action into something that now is subject to political action” (Palonen et al., 2019, p. 249). Applying this definition to the world of sport, it can be observed that political imagery has increased in recent years (Nieland, 2023). Politicization is also addressed in research. So far, the main focus has been on the politicization of journalistic coverage. In some cases, studies cite a specific occasion of politicization, such as the march of North and South Korea under one flag at the 2018 Winter Olympics opening ceremony (English & Murray, 2023; Lee, 2021). Other studies focus rather on themes, such as environmental issues (Abe, 2024; Yoon & Wilson, 2019) or the visibility of marginalized groups (Scovel et al., 2023; Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020). Moreover, mega-sporting events in general tend to serve as prime examples of mediatization trends and raise awareness of political issues (Nieland, 2021; Petty & Pope, 2019). For the 2018 Men’s FIFA World Cup, Meier et al. (2021) were able to determine, based on a Twitter analysis, that the treatment of marginalized groups in the host country Russia ensured a short-term politicization of the tournament, but that long-term attention did not materialize. Furthermore, Petty and Pope (2023) showed that the theme of gender inequality was first highlighted during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup.

The politicization of sport is closely linked to activism in sport (Rugg, 2020). In this context, sport is used as a stage to draw attention to social grievances. McGannon et al. (2023) speak of a “rebirth” of athlete activism. Research has focused on athlete activism around feminism (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; McGannon et al., 2023), racism (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022), or heteronormativity (Lenskyj, 2013). While some athletes such as Megan Rapinoe (Frederick et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2019) and Naomi Osaka (Chen & Kwak, 2023) lead the way as trailblazers, however, some athletes may be reluctant to speak out on polarizing political issues due to their dependence on sponsorship and therefore fear of potential financial penalties (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Khamis et al., 2017).

### 3.3 Sports and Self-Representation

As shown, a solid number of studies exist that have examined the media’s presentation of female athletes, but only a few studies have observed the players’ self-presentation on social media.

With the opportunity to present themselves on social media, athletes no longer have to depend on the goodwill of sports journalists (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009). Since news coverage of female athletes continues to reflect sexist patterns, Bruce (2016) argued that social media offers female athletes the opportunity to present themselves as legitimate and serious athletes. Despite this, in the context of a robust body of literature on the self-presentation of athletes, the online behavior of female athletes during major sporting events remains largely unexplored (Hayes Sauder & Blaszkka, 2018). Rossi and Rubera (2021) used content analysis of National Women’s Soccer League (USA) players on Twitter to examine competition for attention on social media. They highlighted the importance of self-presentation on social media, stating that “for an athlete, it might lead to lucrative product endorsements or better contract conditions with teams wanting to benefit from the player’s popularity” (p. 1146). Their results show that the attention generated by social media engagement depends on the player’s characteristics, such as physical attractiveness and team affiliation, the player’s performance on the pitch, and their posting activity. Rossi et al.’s study underscores the importance of self-presentation for female athletes on social media, but it lacks a strong identification of posting strategies or dominant themes. Hayes et al. (2018) demonstrated that during the 2015 Women’s World Cup, female football players did not comment on political issues on Twitter; instead, they predominantly presented themselves as “informers”.

## 4 Interest of Research

To summarize the state of the current body of research, we know that female athletes in general (Cooky et al., 2021; Pfister, 2015; Sherwood et al., 2019) and female football players, in particular (Bell & Coche, 2022; Nieland, 2021; Petty & Pope, 2019; Pfister, 2015; Shugart, 2003), are not treated the same as their male counterparts. Female athletes also tend to benefit less from the mediatization of sports, while male athletes (e.g., football players), tend to complain about media omnipresence (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016). We therefore analyze the quantity of media coverage by asking:

*RQ1: What level of attention did the Women's European Championship and the Men's World Championship receive in German media coverage?*

Moreover, there is a tendency for political issues to be included in football coverage (Meier et al., 2021; Schallhorn & Häußinger, 2019), and this is especially true for women's football (Nieland, 2021; Petty & Pope, 2019). There remains a dearth, however, of research that investigates the role of athletes' self-representation compared to corresponding news coverage. To identify the differences in the share of political messages, we focus on issue patterns by posing the question:

*RQ2: What themes were raised during the Women's European Championship and the Men's World Championship by players and the media?*

As mentioned above, an important level of analysis in our study is the presentation and positioning of political issues. Following a more qualitative approach, we ask:

*RQ3: In what contexts were political issues addressed?*

To our knowledge, an approach this comprehensive is unique in the realm of sports and communication research.

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## 5 Method

Instagram is the most popular social network in Germany (Beisch & Koch, 2021). The platform allows users to share and comment on content and use hashtags to express particular themes and messages, which makes it ideal for spreading political messages. Furthermore, athletes can use Instagram to represent themselves and address and interact with their audiences directly. In addition, Instagram is becoming increasingly important when it comes to spreading political news (Gonzalez et al., 2023). These characteristics align strongly with our research interests, and therefore, to address our research questions, we directed our focus toward Instagram posts.

For this research, we examined the individual accounts of the German women's and men's team players from both tournaments. In both groups, only one player of the women's squad did not run an Instagram account. Hence, in total we included the accounts of 48 athletes. We also included the six, with regard to followership, most prominent football/sports news media companies in Germany, covering a range of different media types. Specifically, we included the Instagram accounts of the sports program from two public channels (@sportschau, @sportstudio), the sports beat of the widest-reach tabloid newspaper (@sport\_bild), one football-specialized magazine (@kicker) and two private sports channels (@sport1news, @skysportde). We collected all posts from those included in the study over a timespan of 10 days before and after the tournament. For the players' individual accounts, we considered all posts within the relevant time period; for the news media accounts, we only considered those posts that pertained to the respective tournaments. In total, our sample comprises 3130 different Instagram posts (see Table 11.1). We see the individual postings as a unit that combines visual and textual elements. Accordingly, the entire post was taken into account during the coding process.

To answer research question 1, following the procedure of Hase et al. (2021), we calculate the normalized size of Issue Attention. Issue Attention describes the proportion of articles that deal with the respective tournament out of all published articles.

$$\text{issue attention} = \frac{\text{Number of postings dealing with the respective tournament period}}{\text{Number of all postings}} \times 100$$

In our case, we divided the number of posts pertaining to the tournament by the number of posts published by each news outlet during the relevant timespan. To address our second research question, we used a quantitative approach (see Gonzalez et al., 2023). Not only in the context of sports, social media platforms are used for a variety of purposes (Grimmer & Horky, 2018). As a result, various themes are addressed—both on the athletes' private accounts and on the accounts of the media companies. It can be assumed that the content of the topics will be very different simply because of the different contexts of the two tournaments. In order to determine the proportion of postings that primarily consider political contexts as a first step, we are initially interested in a more abstract level and differentiate between five possible themes: sports, private insights, political messages, advertisements, and media-related content (for individual accounts only).

**Table 11.1** Sample; postings during relevant timespan ( $\pm 10$  days; postings referring to the tournament)

Category	Account	Tournament (Women's European Championship [WEC] or Men's World Championship [MWC])	Posts related to the tournament
Female Athletes	22 individual accounts (one athlete without account)	WEC	274
Male Athletes	26 individual accounts	MWC	232
Public Channel I	@sportschau	WEC	125
		MWC	276
Public Channel II	@sportstudio	WEC	72
		MWC	242
Tabloid	@sport_bild	WEC	12
		MWC	134
Football Magazine	@kicker	WEC	71
		MWC	473
Private Channel I	@sport1news	WEC	39
		MWC	436
Private Channel II	@skysportde	WEC	53
		MWC	691

*Sports:* Unsurprisingly, we list sport as a possible category. This includes postings that clearly put sport—i.e., football—in the foreground. This includes, for example, match scenes, analyses, or the posting of results. With regard to the athletes' accounts, this includes postings in which the athletes primarily present themselves as such. This also includes game scenes or training insights. A frequent indicator here is the focus on appropriate sportswear or the use of material from sports photographers. In both cases, the text should also be in the context of sport as soon as it complements the chosen visual content.

*Private Insights:* As the popularity of athletes increases, so does the interest in their private lives—so-called “backstage communication” (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Studies show that athletes often use social media to provide private insights into their lives (Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). This approach to private content can also be a strategy to avoid unwanted media coverage of their private lives (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016). In our case, posts that show athletes in non-sporting contexts and/or reveal private information, for example in interview formats, fall into the category of ‘private insights’.

*Political Messages:* As shown in the literature review, there is a tendency for sport to become politicized. In our study, we understand politicized content as content that deals with fundamental social grievances or political conflicts. This also includes politically charged symbols or the appearance of or references to politicians. This category also includes (the depiction of) activist tendencies.

*Advertisement:* Sport and advertising have always been closely linked, as advertising revenue is the most important funding channel for sport (Pegoraro et al., 2010). Accordingly, social media platforms are also used to conclude advertising contracts. On the one hand, this category includes posts that are clearly labeled as advertising. In addition, we also include self-promotion by media companies, such as references to further media offers, some of which are subject to a fee.

*Media-related Content:* In the sense of the mediatization thesis, athletes orient their behavior to media coverage. At the same time, social media also enables athletes to take a stand on media coverage. This category includes postings in which reference is made to the products of professional media companies, regardless of whether approval or dissent is expressed. As the content of the media reporting category is automatically media-related, this category is only coded for the individual accounts.

The coding process<sup>1</sup> was open for additional or more specific categories. However, as our focus lies on the share of postings with a political focus, no further categories were needed.

To address our third research question, we focused on the posts that were categorized as containing political messages. We used a qualitative content analysis based on the work of Mayring (2014), which combines deductive and inductive category development. Through this approach, news coverage on (political) conflicts can be analyzed on the basis of the conflict position (factual dimension), the conflict opponents (social dimension), or the course of the conflict (temporal dimension; Völker, 2017). We adapted these categories and inductively developed the necessary subcategories. This resulted in seven categories: issues (factual dimension—which issues are precisely covered and in which contexts are they mentioned?), stakeholders (social dimension—what kind of stakeholders are involved and who do they address?), temporal dimension (how did political topics evolve over time?) media role, tone, and meta-communication (media dimension (inductive dimension)—which role did the media play in the politicization process, respectively the political conflict?; see Table 11.2).

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<sup>1</sup>We conducted coding training with two coders (inter-coding-reliability [Cohen's Kappa]: Sports = 0,87; Private Insights = 1; Political Messages = 0,99; Advertisement = 0,88; Media-Related Content = 1



## 6 Results

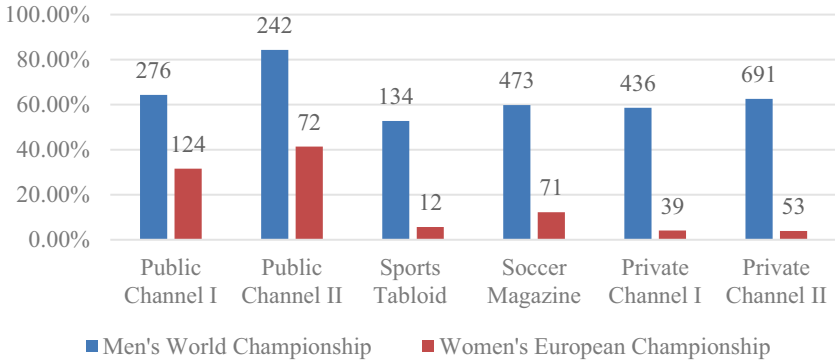
First, it is important to note that German football at a national level seems to be a highly mediatised environment; of the 49 female and male athletes who represented Germany in one of the aforementioned tournaments, only one female athlete (goalkeeper Almuth Schult) does not run an Instagram account. On average, the female players made 11.41 postings ( $SD = 6.08$ ) during the relevant timespan of their tournament, while the male players made on average 8.59 postings ( $SD = 6.36$ ). The media outlets investigated on average made 375.33 postings ( $SD = 182.00$ ) dealing with the Men's World Championship, while they made 61.83 postings ( $SD = 34.48$ ) dealing with the Women's European Championship.

### 6.1 Issue Attention

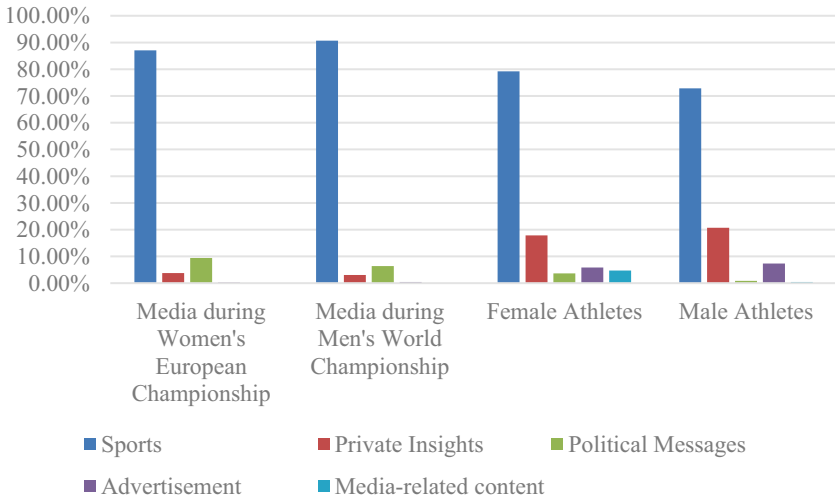
To analyze the amount of media coverage from the different media outlets in our sample, we examined the posts during each tournament. During the Men's World Championship, 62.40 percent of news outlet posts were about the tournament. However, during the Women's European Championship, only 10.08 percent of posts were about the tournament. When we broke the data down by type of news outlet, we found that public broadcasters covered the Women's European Championship more frequently than private outlets (see Fig. 11.1). These findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis put forward by Nieland (2021), which held that public media are paying more attention to women's sports.

### 6.2 Themes

Unsurprisingly, sports was the most used theme in all of the groups (i.e., media, female athletes, male athletes). At least 70 percent of all posts focused on the sport itself, either presenting football-related content (e.g., scenes, results, injuries, etc.) or the athletes presenting themselves as legitimate athletes (see Fig. 11.2). In the following, we will discuss the themes used in the news coverage; then we will identify any gender differences in the athletes' posting behaviors. Finally, we will compare the themes used by the media with the themes used by the athletes.



**Fig. 11.1** Issue attention by news outlet and tournament



**Fig. 11.2** Themes by Media and Athletes

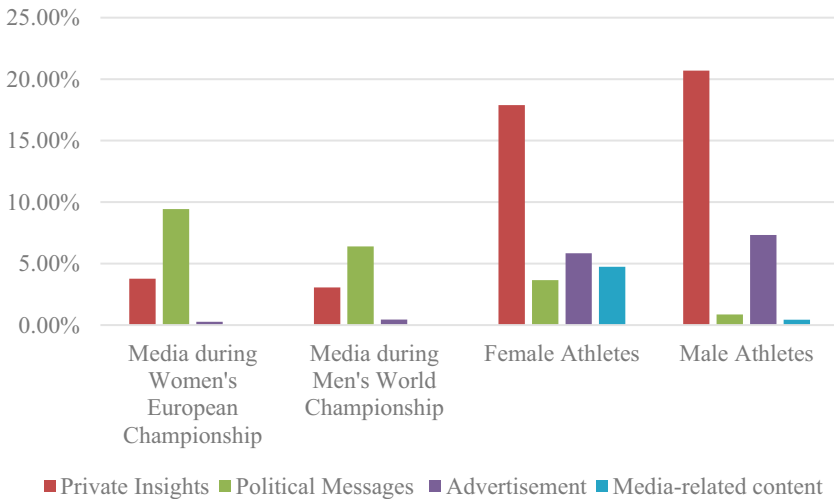
### 6.3 Themes: Media

Our analysis indicated that the media did not only provide more private insights during the Women's European Championship, with 9.43 percent (compared to 6.39% during the Men's World Championship) of all posts containing this type of content, but political issues were also more prominent than during the Men's World Championship. In particular, the tabloid media tended to politicize the Women's European Championship, with one in three posts containing political messages. These results are particularly surprising given the heated political debate in the lead-up to the Men's World Championship.

Considering the issue attention calculated above, we can conclude that political messages were present in both the Men's World Championship and the Women's European Championship coverage. However, during the Men's World Championship, the sport itself was also relevant, while lower attention during the Women's European Championship led to a higher proportion of political messages in the coverage. This underlines current research findings that demonstrate that female athletes have to deal with background noise in the coverage of their sport.

### 6.4 Themes: Athletes

Our analysis also uncovered differences between the themes shared by female and male athletes during the respective tournaments. Following posts pertaining to football, both the female and the male athletes provided their followers with private insights — so-called “backstage communication” (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) — which is typical for Instagram content and aids the athletes in connecting with their audience. However, while male athletes posted more advertisements (7.33%) than their female counterparts (5.84%), women posted significantly more media-related content (4.74%) than the men (0.43%); female athletes, for example, tended to post match announcements from the TV stations that broadcast their matches. We would argue that male athletes do not have as much of a need to participate in this kind of self-advertising because the media, by focusing their coverage on the sport itself, already provide enough promotion for the men's matches. In contrast, the female players must participate in promoting their upcoming matches by announcing them on social media, as their media coverage is such that the sport itself tends to fade into the background. Thus, we can observe bypassing strategies



**Fig. 11.3** Themes by Media and Athletes (Sports Excluded)

used by the female athletes in the sense of promoting their own upcoming matches (Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). These results indicate that male athletes benefit more from mediatization tendencies (e.g., by profiting from advertising contracts or by not being responsible for promoting their own matches).

With regard to political themes, female athletes included them more frequently in their posts (3.65%) than did their male counterparts (0.86%). Along with the news media, the female football players in our sample spread political messages themselves (see Fig. 11.3).

Our analysis supports current research findings by demonstrating that male athletes benefit more from mediatization than their female counterparts. To deepen our knowledge of the politicization of women's football, we present the results of our qualitative analysis of political messages in the following section.

## 6.5 Political Issues

In total, we identified 191 posts that contained political messages: 179 from the media and 12 from the athletes. We present the results of our qualitative analysis of these political messages below.

## 6.6 Political Issues: Athletes

Our study has found that the female athletes tended to spread political messages pertaining to equality: equality for female athletes in terms of salary and visibility, equality for the LGBTQI\* + community, and equality for athletes of all backgrounds. They presented themselves as role models, sometimes even collaborating in advertising deals or with the media to spread these messages.

Among the male athletes, we only identified two posts with political messages. One post supported development aid in Sierra Leone, while the other actively commented on an ongoing media discourse (see below), defending his actions and level of activism by stating:

Anyone who expects us football players to completely abandon our path as athletes and give up our sporting dreams, for which we have worked all our football lives, in order to position ourselves even more clearly politically, will be disappointed. (Müller, 2022)

So, while the women presented themselves as (political) role models, we could detect very little activism among the male athletes. One of the captains, however, did post regarding his active opposition to the politicization of football.

## 6.7 Political Issues: Media

We examined news coverage of political messages by applying our seven conflict subcategories and comparing posts during the two tournaments, starting with the Women's European Championship.

On the *factual dimension*, we see that during the Women's European Championship, issues related to women's football in a broader sense, such as equal visibility or equal pay, were given more focus. In addition, general social grievances were addressed in the context of equality, such as equality for migrants or members of the LGBTQI\* + community.

In terms of the *social dimension*, the coverage during the Women's European Championship highlighted inequalities between men and women in professional football. Therefore, these grievances were also addressed by athletes, politicians, or fans through the media.

On the *temporal dimension*, we identified linear criticism through the media. Essentially, we found that political messages stood for themselves; they were not commented on in subsequent contributions.

Furthermore, we inductively added the *media dimension* to the dimensions proposed by Völker (2017). During the Women's European Championship, the media played a passive role by presenting facts and quotes neutrally: by addressing social grievances rather than, for example, a specific antagonist, the media presented conflict in an unemotional tone and in a socially consensual manner. During the Women's European Championship, we did not find any form of meta-communication in the sense of "metajournalism" (see Carlson, 2016).

With regard to the factual dimension, the issues raised during the Men's World Championship were broader than those raised during the Women's European Championship. In the context of Qatar's human rights violations, equality—in terms of human rights, the visibility of LGBTQI\*+, gender equality, and inequality of opportunity in general—was a major issue. However, other issues were also covered. While the coverage focused on corruption in professional football and FIFA's restriction of political messages and its power to restrict freedom of speech, it also discussed the activism levels of different stakeholders.

On the social dimension, the coverage of the Men's World Championship not only addressed more issues, but it also involved more stakeholders expressing their opinions through the media. In addition to the athletes, politicians, fans, functionaries from FIFA, and national federations were actively involved in the coverage. Some companies even positioned themselves through the media (e.g., by withdrawing their cooperation in relation to the World Cup). It is particularly noteworthy that even the media expressed particular positions, taking on an active role rather than the role of a neutral observer. In line with these different actors, political coverage was not limited to addressing general social grievances. Stakeholders openly positioned themselves against federations, or even against individuals such as officials or athletes. Some political issues were present throughout the tournament and were commented on from different perspectives, such as the abandonment of the 'One Love' armband. In addition, those who were criticized subsequently defended themselves through the media and, in turn, criticized their critics. Thus, on the temporal dimension, we identified a circular pattern of conflict. On the media dimension, we found that in addition to passive reporting with facts and quotes, the media also played an active role in some conflicts, as mentioned above. Through their own reports and opinions, the news media actively commented on a number of political issues—especially in the context of human rights violations. As a result, the tone of the coverage with regard to these issues was somewhat emotional.

In addition, we were able to identify metajournalism, which is described as "the site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (Carlson,

2016, p. 350, see also Malik, 2004) in our analysis of the media posts. Thus, we found that the journalists themselves commented on journalistic content in order to shape narratives and influence the public (Berkowitz, 2000). The metajournalistic discourse during the Men's World Championship revolved around the media's politicization of the tournament and the appropriateness of political activism. Particularly after the German team's elimination in the group stage, the media's active criticism of the players for being too political (or not political enough) was cited as a reason for the team's poor performance. Our analysis showed that various actors participated in discussions regarding the role and limits of sports reporting in heated political debates.

In summary, political messages in media coverage during the Women's European Championship contained coverage of linear conflicts in which social grievances in general were addressed in a neutral tone. In line with the political messages spread on the female athletes' Instagram accounts during the tournament, the demand for equality between men, women, and marginalized groups in football was at the forefront of the media coverage, while overall, journalism functioned as a passive reporter of social grievances. During the Men's World Championship, however, we identified complex, circular conflicts involving far more stakeholders and a (meta)journalistic discourse on the politicization of the tournament, which one male athlete even posted about on his Instagram account.

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## 7 Discussion

Our content analysis of Instagram posts by female and male athletes and the predominant German sports media during the Women's European Championship and the Men's World Championship showed that women's football remains more politicized and is not as well-covered in German sports media. While the Men's World Championship was widely covered from a sporting perspective, the Women's European Championship was covered less frequently. In particular, the tabloid media tended to politicize women's football, with coverage of the sport itself receding into the background. It is worth noting that the political messages during the Women's European Championship revolved around women's football, while the issues during the Men's World Championship derived from a wider geopolitical context. While it is part of journalism's role to report on and address social grievances, our study supports "the gender bias of mass media" mentioned by Ličen et al. (2022). For men's football, the sport itself remained the dominant topic in the journalistic mass media coverage and on social media, although the men's tournament provided more (geo-)political issues. At the same time, the women's tourna-

ment was reported upon less overall, and the focus was less on the sporting event and more on political issues.

The politicization of women's football is also reflected in female athletes' individual posts. The female athletes posted political content significantly more often than their male counterparts. Moreover, the topics discussed by the athletes during both tournaments largely reflected those that were shared and discussed by the media. While the women addressed general social grievances, Thomas Müller, for example, spoke of the media conflict around the politicization of football in his post. Here, the "new wave of mediatization" (Frandsen, 2016) and the "different processes of mediatization in women's and men's sports" (Ličen et al., 2022, p. 795) become obvious.

The findings of this study must be viewed in the light of some limitations. First, the athletes (especially the well-earning male players) may not run their Instagram accounts themselves, as it has become common to hire social media experts to manage one's social media. Furthermore, for practical reasons, our sample only included Instagram posts, while Instagram also offers the option of posting "stories," which are social media elements that are only available for 24 hours. Future studies should also consider these stories, as it can be assumed that athletes may show less "professionalized" content in their Instagram stories. Another limitation pertains to the comparability of the two mega-sporting events. It could be assumed that the degree of politicization of the news coverage cannot be explained by the gender of the athletes alone. We argue that the different contexts—for example, the sporting performance (group stage knock-out vs. final) or the hosting country (England vs. Qatar)—may have had an influence on the level of politicization. We acknowledge that the 2022 Men's World Championship marks a particularly politicized environment due to human rights violations in the host country (Nieland, 2023). It can therefore be assumed that the gap between the levels of politicization of men's and women's football would be even greater in a different context.

The relationship (and boundaries) between politics and football in general remains a fruitful area for future research. Today, some clubs incorporate political activism into their communication strategies by boycotting sponsors or by introducing pride elements into their fan shops. While some fans support this level of activism, others criticize their clubs for being "too political." Thus, the debate continues, and further research should include the fans' perspective when asking: how political should football be?

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# Qatar: The World Cup of Shame or the Greatest Show on Earth?

# 12

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## 1 Introduction

Sport Mega Events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, are among the most significant gatherings globally, attracting immense attention from fans, media, and governments alike. Such major sporting events reach a considerable mass of people across borders and are only visible to the public thanks to the enormous media presence (Hoffmann, 2019, p. 175; Nieland, 2023, p. 34). These events, by their very nature, create spectacles that impact various facets of society, politics, and the economy. Understanding these impacts is crucial, not only for appreciating the events and the competitions but also for recognizing the broader implications they carry. The influence of Sport Mega Events on society is multifaceted. They often act as catalysts for national pride and unity, with extensive media coverage playing a crucial role in shaping public perception (Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Schallhorn, 2017). Within the country, such events can also stimulate intense

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community experiences and feelings of togetherness. They therefore have influence both the external perception and the self-image of the host nation: “Thus, for the host nation, any sport mega-event is solid ground for enhancing a country’s international recognition, boosting the prestige of the nation, and securing the legitimacy of the existing political regime. However, the domestic audience—the population of the host nation—is by no means any less important for the hosts” (Gorokhov, 2015, p. 271). For instance, the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany is known as the “Sommermaerchen” and widely regarded as a success in fostering a sense of community and enhancing the country’s global reputation (Grix & Houlihan, 2014 p. 579 ff.; Mittag & Nieland, 2007). Similarly, the 2014 Olympic Games in London were celebrated for their organizational excellence and for promoting inclusivity and community engagement (Grix & Houlihan, 2014, p. 583 ff.). In addition to economic effects such as a boost in investment in infrastructure and transportation or the promotion of tourism, a World Cup also offers the host country the opportunity to present itself in a good light (Grix & Lee, 2013 p. 529).

At the same time, hosting such a large event and the responsibilities that come with it can be a source of conflict. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar also produced headlines in the media in the run-up to the event. News of non-transparent award procedures, corruption, human rights violations, discrimination against the LGBTQ\* community, sexism, greenwashing, a lack of sustainability and dead migrant workers as victims of the construction of the sports facilities overshadowed the World Cup in Qatar before it could even start (El Ouassil, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022; Rook & Heerdt, 2023).

What are the special features of the state of Qatar and what could be the efforts to present itself as a state and society to the world public when hosting the World Cup? And how did the press media in particular accompany this? These are the questions we want to explore in this article.

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## 2 What Do We Know About Qatar?

Qatar is a hereditary monarchy, with the Al Thani family enshrined in the constitution as the ruling authority (Bauer & Stern, 1988 p. 103ff.). The peninsula is located on the Arabian-Persian Gulf, bordered by Saudi Arabia to the south and sharing maritime boundaries with Bahrain and Iran. The country is characterized by its desert landscapes and extremely hot temperatures, with agricultural cultivation possible only through artificial irrigation. Qatar is one of the world’s largest producers of oil and liquefied natural gas, which grants it significant geopolitical importance (Bauer & Stern, 1988, p. 1031ff.). In 2021, Qatar had one of the highest

GDP per capita in the world at \$76,696 (Statista, 2024), despite having a small population of 2.5 million, of which only 10% are Qatari nationals (Sons, 2022).

Qatar's society is heavily influenced by migrant workers, who predominantly come from Africa and South Asia (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022, p. 3). These migrants often face legal, political, and cultural disadvantages, while Qatari nationals benefit from extensive social welfare (Gieler & Schwarz, 2020). There is a significant gender imbalance due to the predominantly male migrant workforce in the construction industry. Women remain subject to a system of male guardianship, despite government efforts to promote women in education, business, and politics (Amnesty International, 2022). Religiously, Qatar is diverse, with 65.2% of the population being Muslim. There are also significant Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish minorities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). Qatar promotes itself as a supporter of religious tolerance, although apostasy and homosexuality remain illegal and punishable offenses (Amnesty International, 2022).

Even if there is an elected parliament, it has more of a representative function and is less involved in political decision-making. Nevertheless, this election was seen as a major step towards democratization, primarily to divert international criticism ahead of the World Cup (Busse & Wildangel, 2022). The Gulf region, and thus Qatar's immediate neighborhood, is characterized by conflicts and rivalries (Gieler & Schwarz, 2020). The first Gulf War between Iraq and Iran, the invasion of Kuwait, and the US invasion of Iraq, as well as direct influences from regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, shaped Qatar's security perception in the past, making territorial integrity the top priority of Qatari policy.

Prior to 2011, Qatar focused on mediating conflicts and maintaining good relations with powerful countries like the US and Iran. During the Arab Spring, Qatar supported Islamist opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and took a stance against Syria's Assad regime, conflicting with Iran's support for Assad. Qatar played a crucial role in supporting NATO's intervention in Libya. The US has been a crucial security partner for Qatar. Since signing a defense agreement in 1995, Qatar has hosted the Al Udeid Air Base, the most important US military installation in the Middle East. This relationship has provided Qatar with a security guarantee against potential threats from its larger neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, Qatar's leaders have had to navigate a complex landscape, balancing their reliance on US military support with their need to maintain cordial relations with Iran. Iran, which shares the world's largest gas field with Qatar, represents both a partner and a potential adversary. The two countries must collaborate to maximize the benefits from their shared gas reserves. However, their differing approaches to gas extraction and regional politics have often led to

tensions. Qatar's support for the opposition in Syria, a close ally of Iran, highlighted the potential for conflict between the two nations (Steinberg, 2012).

As a World Cup host, Qatar had grown into an important global player, leading many economic and political partners to want to protect their investments and contracts (Busse & Wildangel, 2022). This context led to the official end of the Gulf states' disputes with the signing of the Al-Ula Agreement.

## 2.1 Qatar's Global Sport Strategy

In addition to its foreign policy diversification strategy, the Emirate has been pursuing a soft power strategy since the mid-1990s, with which it aims to act on the global stage through cultural, media, and sports policies and to maintain its global national image (Sons, 2022). Qatari sports policy was already evident early on in strategic investments in Western soccer. Back in 2011, Qatar Sport Investments (QSI) acquired the French soccer club Paris St. Germain (PSG) for €100 million as part of the Qatari sovereign wealth fund (Göbel, 2021). Qatar's intention to establish itself as a reliable and competent partner in European soccer seems to have paid off, as the value of PSG has risen to €2 billion within 10 years (<http://en.psg.fr>, 2021). In addition to direct sponsorship investments in European and transatlantic clubs, leagues and associations, Qatar is investing in the staging of various (mega) sporting events in an attempt to establish itself as an authority on international sporting events (Grix et al., 2019). In the 2000s, there was a veritable boom in sporting events in Qatar. In 2019 alone, more than 50 sporting events took place in Qatar, including annual events such as the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) World Tour, the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) European Tour, the Women Tennis Association (WTA) and many others.

Qatar wants to demonstrate to the world that it is perfectly capable of hosting a mega sporting event such as the FIFA World Cup and is using the international stage to do image work in particular. This is because the Qatari government is instrumentalizing sport as part of its soft power strategy, primarily to build an international and national brand (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022 p. 19).

With reference to Anholt, this concept is also understood as nation branding (2002, pp. 59–60). Nation branding describes all the activities of a nation's interest groups in order to improve the reputation of their own country among international target groups. The attractiveness of a country can be measured using the Nation Brand Index (NBI). Major sporting events are particularly suitable for positively influencing nation branding due to their international nature and high media attention. Media attention in particular offers a large projection surface for socio-

political processes, but also provides a stage for civil protests (Mittag et al., 2021 p. 5; Flemming et al., 2017; Meier et al., 2019). The Qatari government is also trying to improve its international image through sport in order to overcome prejudices and, above all, to appear as a reliable partner for economic relations. Another important point is the positioning as a tourist destination. In this context, sport is used as a communication platform, Boykoff (2022) speaks of sportswashing “a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front” (2022, p. 342).

Actors who embrace sportswashing therefore use mega-events to attract national attention and embody political and economic progress (Boykoff, 2022, p. 343). Sportswashing relies heavily on social relationships and thought patterns that intertwine numerous international and domestic target groups and is therefore aimed at both the local population and the global public (p. 342). It is thus a subtle way of rebuilding reputation and public awareness through sport and culture, at once blinding the past and shaping the future (Boykoff, 2022, p. 343).

## 2.2 How Different Is the Qatari Media System?

The free formation of individual opinion and political will within society requires the prevention of a dominant power of opinion (Kruse, 1996). Mass media play a decisive role in this opinion-forming process, as they create the conditions for reflecting the social and cultural diversity of modern society (Kruse, 1996). At the heart of German media policy is therefore the avoidance of concentrated opinion power in the hands of a few individuals or groups (Meier & Trappel, 2006, p. 361). While the objectives, requirements and legal foundations of the German media system are freely accessible and clearly defined, the Qatari media system presents a more controversial picture—at least only a few sources are available in English or German. Sons (2022) describes that (inter)national media reporting are considered effective instruments of Qatari cultural diplomacy (p. 32). In this context, the media contribute to representing Qatari interests, building and expanding networks and thus stabilizing the reciprocal dimension of diplomacy, which contributes significantly to strengthening soft power. The management of reporting in and about Qatar is therefore of great interest to Qatari politics, which is why independent reporting is hardly possible in Qatar.

The 1979 press law, for example, allows for the prior censorship of media, which gives Qatari media professionals very little leeway for critical journalism. A much more recent law against cybercrime also prohibits any criticism of govern-

ment policy, the royal family and Islam. This is accompanied by alleged violations of social norms, such as critical discussion of the rights of women, homosexuals or migrant workers in Qatar (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). The laws are so vaguely formulated that the regime decides what is considered a breach of norms and what is not (Amnesty International, 2022). As a result, independent news portals can hardly exist unless they bow to the repressive legal framework.

Although Qatar has with *Al Jazeera*,<sup>1</sup> one of the largest television networks in the Arab world, the press also plays a role (Rugh, 2004). Notably, while the press is officially owned by private individuals, these owners are consistently loyal to the ruling regime. The reason for this is relatively simple: influential businessmen or even politicians own the media companies or sit on their supervisory boards. Currently, Qatar has seven daily newspapers, four of which are published in Arabic and three in English. These include the Arabic-language newspapers *Al-Arab*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Raya*, *Al-Sharq*, and the English-language newspapers *Gulf Times*, *Qatar Tribune*, and *The Peninsula* (Rugh, 2004, p. 61).

Even though the state does not directly own the media houses, there are economic dependencies due to state subsidies that lead to self-censorship among journalists. Foreign media content is pre-screened to prevent the circulation of undesirable content. In summary, it can be said that the content of the newspapers strongly correlates with political interests and views. Therefore, it cannot be said that the media in Qatar are legitimized by freedom of opinion and press.

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### 3 State of Research

Current research highlights several key factors that significantly influence media coverage, particularly in the context of major events like the Qatari World Championship. These factors include elite status, ethnocentrism, duration, spatial proximity, personalization, and nationality (Loosen, 1998; Kappe & Schönebeck, 2008; Lohmar & Schauerte, 2013; Kim et al., 2017; Vogler, 2021). Elite status refers to the prominence and influence of individuals or organizations involved, while ethnocentrism underscores the tendency to view events from a culturally biased perspective. Duration and spatial proximity highlight the impact of time and

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<sup>1</sup>Al Jazeera was considered a pioneer of journalism in the Arab world, challenging media and press censorship in the Middle East by confronting autocratic governments and supporting protest movements, such as those in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. However, in recent years, Al Jazeera's significance has declined from a Western perspective, as it no longer offers much controversial reporting.

geographical closeness on the newsworthiness of events. Personalization emphasizes the focus on individual stories and experiences, and nationality pertains to the importance placed on national relevance and identity in media narratives. These factors collectively shape how events are framed and reported in the media, influencing public perception and discourse.

Sport mega events, such as the FIFA World Cup, inherently possess high news value, drawing significant media attention and public interest. This heightened focus not only centers on the event itself but also on peripheral topics of societal interest that surround it. These events serve as a platform for nations to showcase their cultural and social narratives, contributing to a sense of national identity and pride (Mutz & Gerke, 2019, 2020; Schallhorn, 2017; Schallhorn & Häußinger, 2019).

Christoffer (2021) conducted a content analysis of press coverage in German and Brazilian newspapers regarding the World Cup. The findings revealed that critical perspectives predominated over positive ones in the media of both countries. Coverage extended beyond sports topics to emphasize organizational issues and the widespread protests against hosting the World Cup. Notably, the press highlighted the discontent among the Brazilian population and the slow preparations for the event. Additionally, there was minimal post-event reporting, with little attention given to the long-term consequences of the World Cup. This analysis underscores the critical stance taken by the media in both nations towards the event's organization and public reception.

This is also reflected in the focus of the press, which is often on the national athletes or teams and the associated positive effects on the external image of their own country (Grimmer, 2009). In an analysis of the Austrian and Swiss press, Kneidinger (2010) found that the national press not only increasingly emphasizes domestic athletes and teams, but also presents its own nation more positively than others, thereby differentiating itself from others. Further empirical studies support the thesis that one's own nation and its achievements are portrayed much better than those of other nations, thus creating the narrative of an opponent in the press, in the sense of: "us versus them" (Kneidinger, 2010; Schallhorn, 2017; Schallhorn & Beck, 2017; Mutz & Gerke, 2019). With their study results, Schwier and Schauerte (2008) provide insights into the fact that a core function of reporting on mega sporting events is to reproduce ideologies and the hoped-for self-image of the countries—also abroad.

The results of a content analysis of various newspaper articles from the *New York Times* and the *South China Morning Post* from Hong Kong on the 2008 Olympic Games provide similar findings. While the *South China Morning Post* printed almost exclusively positive reports about the athletes and the Games themselves, the

*New York Times* was dominated by negative and critical reports about the Chinese government (Gao, 2010). As a result, the two newspapers' reporting styles differed greatly, which, according to Gao, was due to their specific national interests. Horne (2007) adds as a conclusion to his study that fundamental differences in the valence and choice of topics can be recognized and assumed, depending on whether a major event takes place in the country of the media studied or in another.

It can be seen that social and political topics are also playing a more significant role in the press coverage of major sporting events (Schierl, 2006). Hammett (2011) analyzed the press coverage of the 2010 World Cup in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Star* newspapers between January and July 2010, which also included all three phases of sports coverage (before, during and after the event) of major events. Critical topics initially dominated the coverage—especially before the start of the sporting competitions—but this changed to an increasingly positive connotation following the successful staging of the 2010 World Cup.

Numerous studies on the pre-reporting of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil also show that primarily negative frames were used in the press before the event began (Zeng et al., 2011; Buarque, 2015; Levy, 2017). Protests, social problems, Brazil's incompetence as a host country, sustainability and stadium construction were the most frequent topics. In this context, Levy (2017) criticizes the Eurocentric perspectives, which were increasingly oriented towards the interests of FIFA, rarely took the perspective of the Brazilian population and therefore only dealt with the effects on the country in a subordinate manner. Buarque's (2015) study results support this assumption and show that half of the articles on the 2014 World Cup in Brazil contained political, social or cultural topics related to the World Cup and focused heavily on problems and grievances. These findings are almost congruent with the research results of a study by Zeng et al. (2011) on the coverage of the Olympic Games in Beijing.

Both the two studies on the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2014 World Cup, as well as Hammett's analysis, point to the fact that press coverage is characterized by country-specific stereotypes and has strengthened these stereotypes. All studies show that pre- and post-event reporting tends to be critical—during the sporting competitions, on the other hand, the focus is on sporting topics.

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## 4 Research Questions

The overall question to be answered is:

*How was the 2022 World Cup portrayed in the German and Qatari press?*

The first step is to examine the formal criteria of reporting. As already described in detail, the reporting of major sporting events takes place almost exclusively in the sports section of newspapers (Horky, 2013; Beck, 2017). Accordingly, it can be assumed that this World Cup will also mainly be covered in the sports section in both the Qatari and German press. Above all, press coverage during the World Cup will increasingly be found in the sports section, as it will deal almost exclusively with sporting topics and critical issues will take a back seat.

However, research findings also show that the press is forced to provide background reports on major sporting events in order to ensure added journalistic value compared to television and online media (Schwier & Schauerte, 2008). Accordingly, it can be expected that the length of the articles in the pre-reporting period will be somewhat longer than those in the other periods (during and after), as it is mainly analyses, portraits and the presentation of background topics that are considered here. As a result, political, social and economic issues related to the World Cup are increasingly being discussed and it can be expected that in the course of the press coverage of this World Cup, topics outside the sports sector will also be considered. It can therefore be assumed that there has been a shift in the focus of topics over time, which also suggests differences in departmental affiliation. It is therefore assumed that the pre- and post-match coverage is also considered in non-sports sections, also only to a limited extent, and that the coverage during the World Cup is mainly printed in the sports section. This fact also allows conclusions to be drawn about the number of opinionated articles in the press. This is because a negative and critical discussion is to be expected above all in opinionated articles that reflect the political stance of the newspaper and the opinion of the journalist (Schwier & Schauerte, 2008). Consequently, it can be assumed that the proportion of opinionated articles in the German newspapers will be greater, especially in the pre- and post-reporting sections. Due to the tabloid orientation of the *BILD* newspaper, it is also assumed that the volume of opinionated articles in this newspaper will be significantly higher than in the other newspapers. In addition, the Qatari press laws and the government's objectives indicate that the hosting of the World Cup can hardly be criticized in the media and that the proportion of opinionated articles in the Qatari press will therefore be very low. For reasons of research economics, it is not feasible to examine the proportion of World Cup coverage in relation to overall newspaper coverage. Accordingly, only conclusions are drawn from the research findings.

*RQ1: How did the press before (May 20th—Nov. 19th), during (Nov. 20th—Dec. 18th), and after (Dec. 19th—Jan. 18th) the 2022 World Cup develop in terms of the number and length of articles, departmental affiliation and the proportion of opinionated article types overall and in the individual newspapers?*

Some studies have empirically proven that the use of photos in sports reporting has increased in recent decades and is frequently used due to the emotional nature of sports reporting (Vögele & Seeger, 2021). Accordingly, it can be assumed that a similar number of photos are used for the presentation in all newspapers. The main difference will be the prevalence of topics and the emotions conveyed by the photos. Based on the assumption that the German newspapers will contain significantly more critical topics, it can be assumed that photos with negative moods will predominate through images of protests, poverty, sadness, frustration and discrimination, for example. In the Qatari press, on the other hand, it is expected that a consistently positive, cheerful and successful portrayal will dominate, which is why the photo series will also convey this mood.

*RQ2: How often were articles accompanied by photos and what mood did they convey? Were there differences between countries?*

As already mentioned, critical reporting is to be expected predominantly in the pre- and post-event coverage, while the focus during the tournament tends to be on sporting events. It can be assumed that social, political and economic issues in particular will be addressed in the German press. These are Qatar's standard of living and wealth, the Qatari government, Qatar's foreign policy relations, sportswashing, Islam, the ban on alcohol in stadiums, human rights violations, the inhumanity of working conditions for migrant workers and fatal accidents on construction sites, discrimination against women and the LGBTQ\* community, corruption, restrictions on press freedom, the energy crisis in Europe, Qatar's oil and natural gas reserves, sustainability of stadium construction, climate & weather, the cultural significance of soccer in Qatar and culture outside of soccer (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Grix et al., 2019; Al Thani, 2021; Andersson et al., 2021; Boykoff, 2022). It can therefore be assumed that these topics will dominate the German agenda. Nevertheless, these are as yet unsubstantiated hypotheses that need to be examined and investigated. It can therefore be assumed that the pre-event reporting in German newspapers will be particularly critical and negative, whereas reporting during the tournament with a focus on sport will tend to be neutral or slightly positive. As the period of pre-reporting covers a much longer period of time than the reporting after or during the sporting event, the pre-reporting

can be perceived much more dominantly and intensively than the reporting of sporting topics during the tournament. As a result, aversions and a distancing attitude towards the World Cup can be strengthened by critical pre-event reporting. Nevertheless, the influence of positive impressions from a successful tournament, the “hype” that a World Cup can trigger and the associated positive change in attitude should not be underestimated at this point (Knoll et al., 2014). Especially as the frequency of reporting on the World Cup will increase massively during this time. It can therefore be assumed that increasingly positive reporting will also depend on the success of the favored teams. Based on the research presented and the empirical values of the pre-test, it is therefore assumed that the German newspapers will initially convey a negative overall impression, which will turn slightly positive during the World Cup and paint an ambivalent to negative overall picture. Germans are therefore more likely to perceive the World Cup as critical and negative, which is reinforced by the early elimination of the German national team. This contrasts with Qatari reporting and the perception of the perception of Qatari society. Previous studies have already confirmed the supra-regional differences in the topic prevalence of reporting, which can be attributed to the political orientation of the respective nations (Horne, 2007; Gao, 2010).

Against the background of the Qatari soft power strategy, the Qatari press laws, which massively restrict press freedom, and the media’s proximity to the state, it can be assumed that the Qatari newspapers will consistently report positively on the World Cup. As already discussed, the media is an important tool in Qatar’s soft power strategy and is essential for Qatar’s external image. Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that the selected Qatari newspapers will report negatively on the World Cup in any way in order to spread a positive mood in the country itself and spark the formation of a national identity. It can be assumed that the newspapers will try to create anticipation through the preliminary reporting and will print sports history topics, analyses, portraits and background reports on the preparations for the World Cup. In addition, it can be assumed that during the World Cup there will be an increasing focus on sensational and euphoric reporting that emphasizes certain sporting highlights, individual players or teams. Criticism of the staging of the World Cup is not to be expected, if sporting achievements are. It can therefore be assumed that Qataris perceive the World Cup in a consistently positive light.

*RQ3: What overall impression (positive, negative, neutral or ambivalent) of the World Cup was conveyed in the press coverage?*

*RQ4: Which topics were covered in the press coverage and to what extent? What media reality do the German and Qatari press create through their agenda*

*setting? What conclusions can be drawn from the connotation and choice of topics in the reporting on the restriction of press freedom in Qatar?*

In line with the prevalence and choice of topics, the German press is increasingly attributing negative and critical connotations to Qatar. It is therefore assumed that the following attributes are increasingly ascribed to Qatar in the German press: dismissive, poor, conservative, serious, discriminatory, backward, devout, dangerous, patriarchal, traditional, corrupt, opportunistic, incompetent, sad, unprepared, dissatisfied, irresponsible, unreasonable. In contrast, it is assumed that the following attributions will dominate in the Qatari press: rich, cheerful, oriental/exotic, cosmopolitan, tolerant, modern, friendly, innovative, relaxed, happy, competent, secure, self-confident, responsible, economically strong, attractive to tourists. At this point, the state of research points to controversial expert opinions as to whether Qatar can benefit internationally from an image boost.

*RQ5: What attributes were attributed to the host country Qatar and the Qataris? Were there differences between the German and Qatari newspapers and over time? Which national image was created about Qatar in the German and Qatari press? Can we assume that Qatar has gained an image and thus strengthened its soft power?*

It can be assumed that addition to athletes, the main actors in press coverage are increasingly government authorities and politicians. Qatar and FIFA can therefore initially be singled out as the main actors, although these are evaluated in different ways. While the Qatari newspapers will portray Qatar and FIFA as very positive, innovative, unifying and strong, it can be assumed that the German media will tend to create a negative image. In addition, the Qatari population, migrant workers, bought fans, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, the World Cup organizing committee, the German national team, Hansi Flick and Qatar's Emir will certainly be treated as the main protagonists in the German press. The Qatari press, on the other hand, will mainly focus on individual athletes and successful national teams, the Qatari national team, the Qatari national coach Félix Sánchez, the Qatari government and the Qatari World Cup Committee, the fans, FIFA, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, the World Cup mascot and events surrounding the World Cup.

*RQ6: Which persons or groups of persons were the main protagonists in the articles and how were they evaluated? In particular, how were FIFA and the Qatari government portrayed? Are there differences here between the individual newspapers and the periods examined?*

## 5 Methodology and Study Design

The quantitative content analysis method was chosen for data collection. The first step is to select the relevant time period, i.e. to define the period of investigation in which the media content is to be analyzed (Rössler, 2017). In this case, the soccer World Cup as the object of investigation significantly defines the period under investigation. The tournament was held from November 20, 2022 to December 18, 2022, which defines the period of reporting during the World Cup. As pre- and post-event reporting also play an important role in answering the research questions in this research paper, the start date of the research period was chosen as May 20, 2022 and the end date was set as January 18, 2023. January 18, 2023 was set as the end date. This covers exactly half a year of pre-reporting before the start of the tournament, as well as a full month of post-reporting after the end of the tournament. The main reason for this is that the research results of some studies show that pre-tournament coverage peaks around 6 months before the start of the tournament and that post-tournament coverage loses considerable relevance shortly after the end of the tournament (Gao, 2010; Hammett, 2011; Schallhorn & Beck, 2017; Grix et al., 2019; Christoffer, 2021). Other studies also point to a rapid discontinuation of reporting on the sporting event a few weeks after the end of the tournament, which is why the period of the post-event reporting under consideration is much shorter than the pre-event reporting. Nevertheless, comparability of the data should be ensured, which is why the study periods were adjusted proportionally.

Although television is still regarded as the leading medium, especially in sports reporting, it is clear that print media still make a major contribution to opinion-forming (Bertling, 2009). The press stands out as the chosen media genre for analysis because it performs essential opinion-forming and information functions. Daily newspapers provide important information, analyses and portraits that go beyond the topics of sport and thus enable the recipient to form a comprehensive opinion on political, social and societal topics related to the major sporting event (Bertling, 2009). They focus on exclusivity rather than entertainment and deal with topics that are not covered by television (Schwier & Schauerte, 2008). The focus of the press is therefore on extensive pre-, post- and reporting, which makes it possible to classify and evaluate the event and what has happened (Schwier & Schauerte, 2008). Since topics outside of sport, such as the nation's image as a center of extra-political activity, freedom of opinion and the power of the media on public discourse, are of great importance for the research questions to be investigated power of the media on public discourse, are of great importance and at the same time a

different representation of the tournament in national media is assumed, newspapers are ideally suited as a meaningful object of investigation. The two national daily newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) were selected as media outlets for the German newspaper titles. Furthermore, these are still regarded as German quality newspapers, which is why they are known for their high-quality research as well as comprehensive and differentiated reporting (Brosius et al., 2016; Rössler, 2017). Both contribute significantly to opinion formation in Germany due to their circulation and the associated reach. While the SZ is generally also classified as left-leaning, the FAZ is considered more conservative-liberal (Rössler, 2017). *BILD* is a tabloid newspaper and appeals to its readers primarily with light entertainment, gossip and scandal reporting. It is often accused of populism, a lack of factual orientation, inadequate research, agitation, excessive scandalization and simply spreading false reports and incorrect information. Even though it covers far more human interest topics than politics, the Bild newspaper is considered to have a conservative orientation. Due to the tabloid press' urge to scandalize, it is to be expected that they will primarily focus on controversial and critical topics related to the World Cup. The *Qatar Tribune* and *The Gulf Times* were selected as Qatari newspapers. First of all, the selection is much more limited than the German press landscape due to the small number of daily newspapers. In addition, due to the language barrier, only English-language newspapers can be examined. On the one hand, these titles were selected because they are among the newspapers with the highest circulation and are therefore relatively comparable to the German newspapers (Rugh, 2004). Secondly, *Qatar Tribune* is the English-language sister newspaper of the Arabic Al-Arab, both of which are owned by the Qatari Foreign Minister (Rugh, 2004). It can therefore be assumed that there are major similarities in terms of content and that a comparable thematic agenda to the Arabic-language press can be found, thus reflecting a real media reality. *The Gulf Times* is the English-language newspaper with the highest circulation and has the same readership as Arabic magazines. However, as this readership mainly comes from South Asia, Africa, India, England or America, it primarily deals with target group-specific content. It can therefore be assumed that the content of the two newspapers differs despite their English-language readership. In total 4612 articles were coded (3708 articles in Qatari Newspapers; 904 articles in German newspapers). The intra-coder-reliability ( $n = 50$ ) was between 0.74 and 1.0 (Cronbach's alpha) (Table 12.1).

In total the FAZ published 290 articles, SZ 145 articles, BILD 468 articles, Gulf Times 2190 articles and Qatar Tribune 1519 articles.

**Table 12.1** Distribution of the test material.  $X^2(8, N = 4612) = 61.457$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ; Cramer- $V = 0.82$ 

Period	FAZ (%)	SZ (%)	BILD (%)	Gulf Times (%)	Qatar Tribune (%)
Before	46	53	40	43	40
During	48	30	57	51	51
After	6	17	3	6	8

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Formal Attributes of the Articles

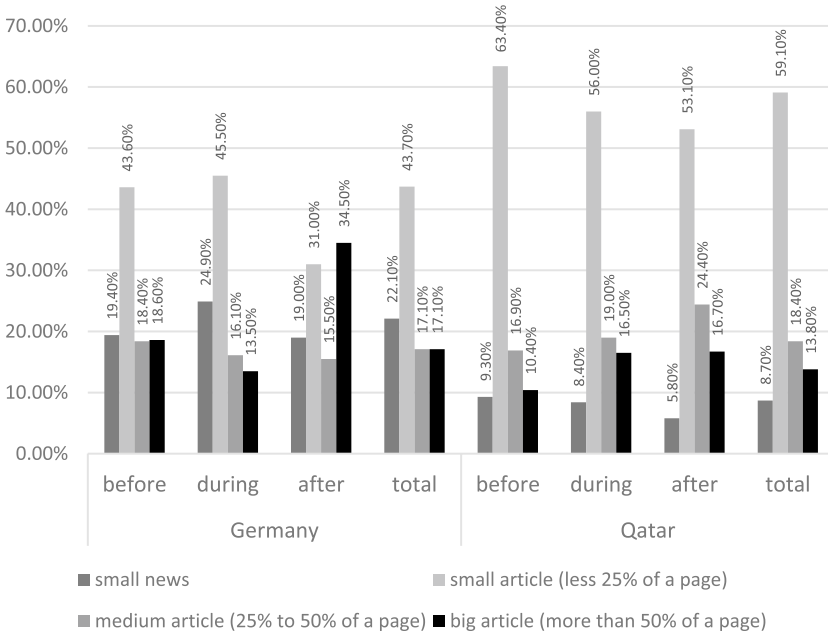
As already reported in *RQ1*, the first aim is to see whether differences can be identified in the external attributes of the articles between the reporting of the individual countries. To do this, the relative frequencies of the descriptive variables are first calculated.

First of all, we are concerned with the question of article length. And as can be seen from Fig. 12.1, the Qatari newspapers mainly used articles of up to a quarter of a page in length and used small reports much less frequently, which were observed in German newspapers in comparison. It is also worth noting that very large articles were again published in Germany after the World Cup.

As can already be seen from Fig. 12.1, the article lengths change during the various phases of a mega sporting event. These results are also statistically verifiable and can be reported as the results of a Chi-Square-Test with a significance of  $\alpha = 0.05$ :  $X^2_{\text{Germany}}(6, N = 903) = 20.694$ ;  $p < 0.05$  and  $X^2_{\text{Qatar}}(6, N = 3708) = 45.756$ ;  $p < 0.05$ .

If we compare the overall results of the article length, we can confirm, that the Qatari newspapers used longer articles ( $X^2(3, N = 4611) = 153.733$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

If we examine in which sections of the newspapers the articles were published, the following picture emerges, as shown in Fig. 12.2. While in Germany over 88% of all articles appeared in the sports section, in the Qatari newspapers this figure was only around 39%. In contrast, most articles in Qatari Media were found in the politics section (44%)—in Germany only 6%. The Qatari media also occupied the front page much more frequently (9%) than the German newspapers (0.6%). Culture and lifestyle sections did not appear at all in the Qatari media. It is also worth noting that opinion articles were observed much more frequently in Qatari newspapers (3.5%) than in German newspapers (0.6%). If we take a closer look at the different phases we see also significant differences.



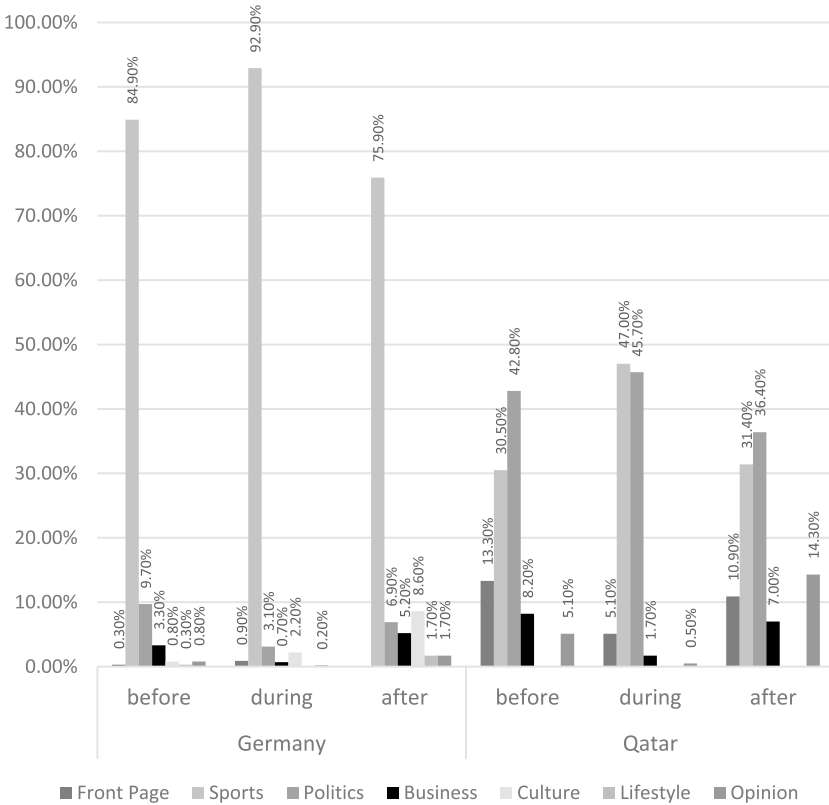
**Fig. 12.1** Article length by country

In Germany, more articles were published in a political context before and after the sporting competitions, as well as in the business section. We can speak of a “U-shape of reporting” and see this in the Qatari newspapers as well. It is also interesting to note that a number of articles appeared in the cultural sections of German newspapers, especially after the sporting event, which did not play a role in the first phase and did not receive much attention during the tournament.

We can confirm that there is a correlation between the phase of reporting and the topic placement in the various departments. The calculated chi-square tests provide proof of this:  $X^2_{\text{Germany}}(12, N = 903) = 54.732$ ;  $p < 0.05$  and  $X^2_{\text{Qatar}}(12, N = 3708) = 354.675$ ;  $p < 0.05$ .

If we examine the articles to see whether they are opinionated, the following representation emerges (see Fig. 12.3). In total we can report, that the German newspapers used 26% opinionated articles (Qatari newspapers 19.5%). With  $X^2(1, N = 4612) = 20.72$ ;  $p < 0.05$  there is a significant difference between the countries.

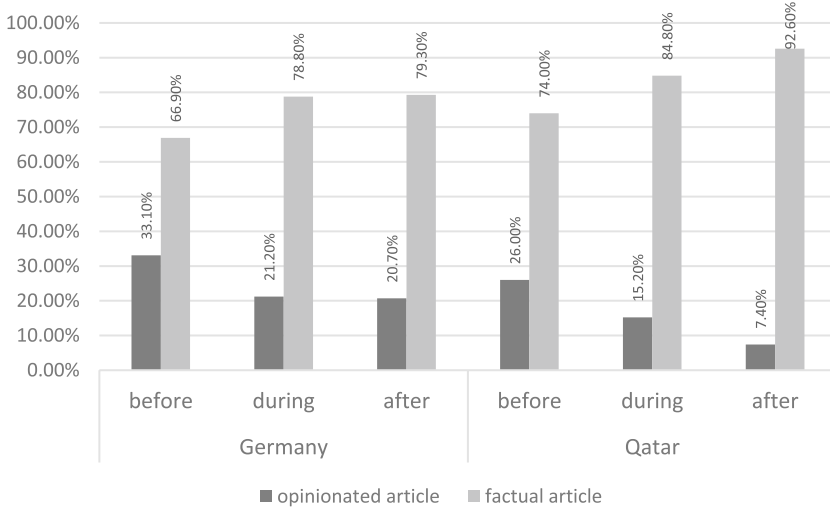
In response to the assumption that the BILD newspaper in particular has published a particularly large number of opinion articles in Germany, it can be said that



**Fig. 12.2** Presentation of articles in sections by country

the BILD newspaper has in fact published by far the most opinion articles at 42% (SZ: 14.5%, FAZ: 7.2%). Had it not been for the BILD newspaper, even the Qatari media would have published more opinion pieces (Qatar Tribune: 24% and The Gulf Times: 17%).

The press coverage of the 2022 World Cup showed distinct patterns in German and Qatari newspapers across the different phases of the event. *RQI* was thoroughly addressed through the analysis presented. The results successfully delineated the differences in article length, the distribution of articles across various newspaper sections, and the prevalence of opinionated content between German and Qatari newspapers across the specified time periods. The findings, supported by statistical tests, revealed significant variations in editorial approaches,

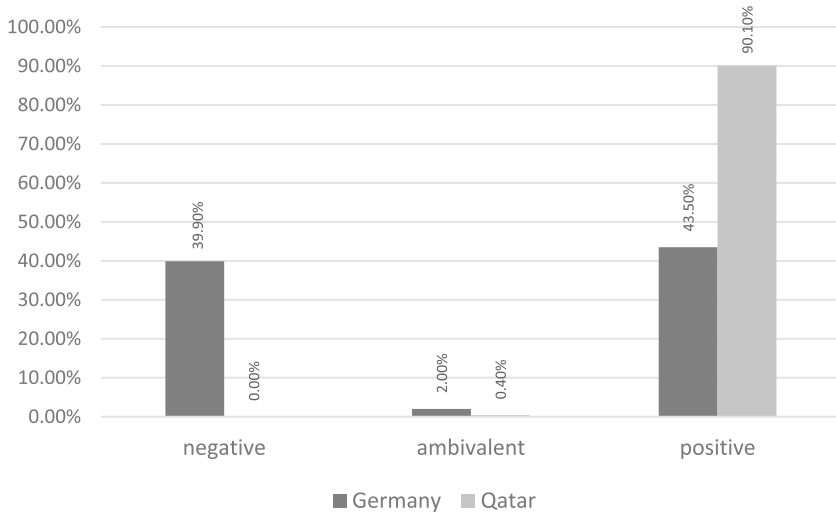


**Fig. 12.3** Journalistic formats used by country

confirming that the research question was comprehensively answered. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of international media coverage of major sporting events, reflecting both cultural and political influences on journalistic practices.

Another formal criterion is the illustration of articles, as defined in *RQ2*. As was to be expected, most of the articles are illustrated. Overall, it could be proven that photos were used in 9 out of 10 ( $n = 2826$ ) articles. Nevertheless, there are again significant differences when looking at the countries. While 80.3% of the articles in the German media were illustrated, 90.2% were illustrated in the Qatari media ( $X^2(1, N = 2826) = 49.16; p < 0.05$ ). How were the photos used? Did the visualization help to support positive emotions or was it intended to underline negative points? To answer this question, a sentiment analysis was carried out for the photos.

Even if the analyzed number of photos differs, the sentiment analysis (Figs. 12.4) chart vividly illustrates the divergent usage of photos. The analysis of photo content used by German and Qatari newspapers reveals a striking divergence in editorial strategies and cultural approaches to visual communication. In German newspapers, 39.90% of the photos convey a negative sentiment, while a small portion, 2.00%, conveys ambivalence, and 43.50% conveys positivity. This distribution suggests a balanced approach, with a notable presence of negative imagery, likely



**Fig. 12.4** Sentiment analyses of the used photos by country ( $n_{\text{ger}} = 261$ ;  $n_{\text{qat}} = 2032$ )

reflecting a more critical or realistic portrayal of events. In stark contrast, Qatari newspapers exhibit an overwhelming emphasis on positive sentiment, with 90.10% of the photos conveying positivity, and a negligible 0.40% and 0.00% conveying ambivalence and negativity, respectively. This pronounced positivity indicates a strategic editorial choice to project an optimistic and favorable image, possibly aligning with cultural values or state objectives. The minimal negative content in Qatari newspapers underscores a significant difference in media portrayal between the two countries, highlighting how cultural, political, and social factors influence journalistic practices and the representation of news through media.

## 6.2 Content Dimensions of the Articles

As we have already seen in the analysis of illustrations, media content can convey certain basic moods. This also applies to articles, which is why we want to answer *RQ3* below, which overall mood was conveyed in the articles from the two countries Germany and Qatar ( $n_{\text{ger}} = 373$ ;  $n_{\text{qat}} = 2417$ ). In German newspapers, 66.9% of the photos convey a negative sentiment, 14.8% are ambivalent, and 14.6% are positive. This suggests a predominance of negative imagery, possibly reflecting a more critical perspective in news reporting. In stark contrast, Qatari newspapers

show a strong inclination towards positive imagery, with 98.1% of the articles classified as positive, while only 0.4% are negative and 0.7% are ambivalent. This indicates a deliberate editorial choice to project an overwhelmingly optimistic outlook.

The comparative analysis of non-sporting topics highlighted in German and Qatari newspapers reveals substantial differences in editorial focus and sociopolitical priorities. In Germany, the three most frequently covered topics unrelated to sports are the rights of women and the LGBTQ\* community, human rights, and corruption. Specifically, 23.80% of the content pertains to the rights of women and the LGBTQ\* community, a stark contrast to the mere 0.2% in Qatari media. Human rights issues account for 12.20% of the German media coverage, compared to only 1.3% in Qatari media. Corruption is the focus of 11.40% of the content in German newspapers, while it constitutes only 0.2% of the coverage in Qatar.

Conversely, Qatari newspapers prioritize topics related to parties, public viewing, and entertainment, which make up 13.10% of their coverage, compared to just 1.9% in German media. The success of organizational efforts is also a significant topic in Qatar, with 12.50% of the coverage, whereas it only appears in 0.5% of German media. Additionally, international relations of Qatar feature prominently, accounting for 9.70% of the content, in contrast to 0.8% in German newspapers.

These findings underscore a profound divergence in media priorities and reflect the differing sociopolitical landscapes of the two countries and give an answer to *RQ4*. German media's emphasis on social justice issues like human rights and corruption suggests a critical and investigative journalistic approach aimed at addressing societal challenges. On the other hand, Qatari media's focus on entertainment, organizational success, and international relations highlights a narrative centered on national pride, positive achievements, and international diplomacy.

The answer to *RQ5* show profound differences in framing and narrative emphasis of the media coverage. In German newspapers, Qatar is predominantly portrayed in a negative light, with a significant focus on issues such as discrimination (29.9%), corruption (10.8%), and lack of transparency (9.8%). While the country's economic strength is acknowledged (6.9%), other attributes are generally negatively connoted, with descriptions like "dangerous," "irresponsible," and "regressive." This critical portrayal suggests a scrutinizing and often skeptical perspective in the German media's coverage of Qatar.

Conversely, Qatari newspapers adopt a markedly different approach, emphasizing positive and empowering attributes. The focus is primarily on Qatar's success (15.9%) and its hospitality and openness to the world (13.10%). Qatar is depicted as progressive and innovative (12.7%), economically strong (9.6%), and aware of its responsibilities (9.3%). This positive framing highlights a deliberate effort to

project a favorable image of the country, leveraging attributes of soft power to enhance its international standing and influence.

### 6.3 Key Actors in the Media Coverage

Taking a closer look at the covered institutions and people, as asked in *RQ6*, we can report the following findings:

In the Qatari press, the analysis identified the most frequently mentioned key actors, reflecting the central themes covered by local media. The Qatari government, including specific ministers and the ruling family, was the most highlighted group, appearing in 16% of the articles before, during, and after the World Cup. This group was often discussed in a slightly positive context, reflecting the government's efforts and achievements in organizing the World Cup. The prominence of the Qatari government and ruling family in the media suggests a deliberate attempt to project a positive image of Qatar's leadership and governance.

International politicians and organizations were also frequently mentioned, with 14% of the articles focusing on these actors. These mentions typically involved expressions of support for Qatar and congratulations on the successful organization of the World Cup. Notable figures included politicians from Italy, France, Spain, the USA, and several African and Middle Eastern countries. Such coverage aimed to demonstrate Qatar's growing international influence and the widespread approval of its efforts.

Prominent Qatari companies and entrepreneurs, particularly those involved in World Cup-related projects, received significant media attention, being featured in 11% of the articles. The World Cup Organizing Committee (8%), Qatari ambassadors (3%), security forces (2%), construction firms (2%), and international partnerships were extensively covered, reflecting their critical roles in the event's success. The frequent mentions of these actors underscore the comprehensive national effort behind the World Cup and highlight the collaborative nature of the preparations.

The German press, on the other hand, presented a very different narrative. The Qatari government and ruling family were also among the most frequently mentioned actors, appearing in 19% of the articles, but the sentiment was predominantly negative. Only 3% of the coverage was positive, with 77% being negative. This negative portrayal was linked to discussions on human rights issues, allegations of corruption, and criticisms of Qatar's political system. Such coverage reflects the critical stance of the German media and public towards Qatar, influenced by broader debates on human rights and governance.

FIFA and its president, Gianni Infantino, were similarly discussed in a negative light, with 60% of the mentions being negative. The association of these actors with corruption scandals and lack of transparency significantly impacted their media portrayal. This critical view was consistent across various German newspapers, emphasizing the controversies surrounding FIFA's decision to award the World Cup to Qatar.

Interestingly, the German national team and other national teams received more balanced coverage, with a mix of positive, neutral, and negative sentiments. The performance of the German team, which was eliminated early in the tournament, received mixed reactions, balancing between disappointment and neutral reporting. This trend aligns with previous research suggesting that national teams often receive more nuanced coverage compared to other stakeholders.

German political figures, such as Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, were covered in ambivalent tones. Their involvement in World Cup-related activities, such as Faeser's attendance at the opening match wearing a "One Love" armband, drew mixed reactions. This ambivalence highlights the complex interplay between sports, politics, and media, where public actions are scrutinized from multiple perspectives.

It seems that the German press operates in a more open and critical media environment, allowing for diverse viewpoints and rigorous scrutiny of public figures and institutions. The negative coverage of the Qatari government and FIFA reflects this freedom and the broader public discourse on human rights and governance.

Despite these differences, both media landscapes share a common feature: the significant attention given to national interests and key stakeholders. In Qatar, this manifests as a concerted effort to promote national achievements and international support, while in Germany, it translates into critical scrutiny and a focus on transparency and accountability.

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## 7 Conclusion and Discussion

The 2022 FIFA World Cup, held in Qatar, emerged as a focal point of global media coverage. The event not only showcased the world's best football talent but also highlighted significant disparities in how the tournament was portrayed by different national media outlets. We summarize the findings from a comprehensive content analysis of German and Qatari newspapers, focusing on the cultural, political, and social contexts that influenced media narratives.

## 7.1 Cultural and Political Influences

The Qatari media's overwhelmingly positive coverage of the World Cup can be attributed to several factors rooted in the country's media environment and political strategy. Qatar's media operates under a controlled environment with strict censorship laws that limit critical journalism. According to Reporters Without Borders (2022), "The 1979 press law allows for the prior censorship of media, which gives Qatari media professionals very little leeway for critical journalism". This environment ensures that media content aligns with the government's objectives, particularly its soft power strategy. Sons (2022) describes that "international media reporting is considered an effective instrument of Qatari cultural diplomacy". By promoting positive attributes such as national pride, economic strength, and international diplomacy, the Qatari media aimed to enhance the country's image on the global stage. Hosting the World Cup was portrayed as a testament to Qatar's capability and a strategic move to foster national unity and pride, reinforcing Qatar's efforts to brand itself as a modern, progressive nation.

## 7.2 Critical Stance of German Media

In contrast, the German media's coverage was marked by a critical perspective, reflecting the country's free press environment and societal values that prioritize transparency and human rights. Christoffer (2021) found that "critical perspectives predominated over positive ones in the media of both countries" when analyzing press coverage in German and Brazilian newspapers regarding the World Cup. German newspapers focused extensively on social justice issues, including human rights abuses, corruption, and the rights of women and the LGBTQ+ community. This critical stance was evident in the high proportion of negative articles and photos that conveyed skepticism and scrutiny towards Qatar and FIFA. This is consistent with findings by Schwier and Schauerte (2008), who noted that "a core function of reporting on mega sporting events is to reproduce ideologies and the hoped-for self-image of the countries". The German media's emphasis on these issues indicates a broader discourse on the ethical and political implications of hosting the World Cup in a country with a controversial human rights record.

### 7.3 Impact of Media Framing

The differences in media portrayals have significant implications for public perception. In Germany, the critical coverage likely reinforced negative perceptions of Qatar, emphasizing controversies related to human rights and corruption. Hammett (2011) observed that “critical topics initially dominated the coverage—especially before the start of the sporting competitions—but this changed to an increasingly positive connotation following the successful staging of the 2010 World Cup”. This framing aligns with the values of a free press that seeks to hold powerful entities accountable and inform the public about underlying issues. On the other hand, Qatari media’s positive framing aimed to foster a sense of national pride and unity, presenting the World Cup as a major success and a symbol of national achievement. This positive narrative was crucial for Qatar’s soft power strategy, which seeks to project an image of the country as a hospitable and capable host for international events. As Brannagan and Reiche (2022) state, “the Qatari government is instrumentalizing sport as part of its soft power strategy, primarily to build an international and national brand”.

Understanding these differences is crucial for comprehending how media narratives are constructed and the impact they have on international perceptions. The case of the 2022 FIFA World Cup illustrates the power of media framing in shaping public discourse and highlights the importance of considering cultural, political, and social contexts in media analysis. This study underscores the need for a critical examination of media practices and the ways in which they influence and are influenced by national interests and values.

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## 8 Outlook

The role of major sporting events has evolved over the years, transcending beyond mere competition to become significant platforms for global diplomacy and cultural exchange. Hosting events like the FIFA World Cup has been seen as a powerful means for nations to project their “soft power” (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). However, this potential for positive influence is often marred by underlying controversies, particularly concerning human rights violations. This chapter delves into the dichotomy of these global spectacles, using the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar as a case study to explore the broader implications for the future of such events.

## 8.1 The World Cup: Soft Power Versus Controversy

Qatar's ambition to enhance its global standing through the 2022 FIFA World Cup faced significant backlash. While the event was intended to showcase Qatar's cultural and infrastructural advancements, it instead highlighted severe criticisms regarding human rights issues. Reports of labor abuses and restrictive social policies dominated international discourse, transforming the intended celebration of sport into a "controversial event" (Beyer & Schulze-Marmeling, 2021; Nieland, 2023).

## 8.2 The Impact on Communication Science

The widespread criticism of the 2022 FIFA World Cup underscores a pivotal challenge for communication science (Nieland, 2023). The traditional reach and influence of major sporting events are now under scrutiny. The controversy surrounding Qatar's hosting rights brings forth critical questions about the ethical implications of sports media events and their future viability. This chapter argues that the debate—whether such events are "The World Cup of Shame or the Greatest Show on Earth?"—is pivotal in shaping future communication strategies and the public perception of global sports.

## 8.3 The Future of Major Sporting Events

The potential awarding of the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Saudi Arabia has further intensified the debate. Given Saudi Arabia's own contentious human rights record, there are growing concerns that the trend of hosting sports events in controversial locales might continue, raising ethical and communicative challenges for the global community. Conversely, the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand offers a glimmer of hope. Unlike the controversies in Qatar, the 2023 tournament in these nations was celebrated for its inclusivity and progressive values. It demonstrated that major sporting events could still be platforms for positive cultural exchange and progress, highlighting the potential for a more optimistic future in sports media events.

The duality of global sporting events—exemplified by the contentious 2022 FIFA World Cup and the hopeful 2023 Women's World Cup—reflects the complex interplay between sports, politics, and media. As the world anticipates future events, including the controversial possibility of Saudi Arabia hosting in 2034, it is imperative to critically assess the ethical dimensions and communicative impact of such spectacles.

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# The ‘Other’ Side of Football: Qatari Media’s Reactions to Perceived Western Othering During the 2022 FIFA World Cup

# 13

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By hosting the FIFA World Cup, Qatar hoped to convey a positive nation image to the world. Yet, since it won the bid for the World Cup in 2010, it faced strong criticism, particularly from European politicians, football fans, and the Western media. Sports politics scholar James Dorsey summarized the main allegations in Western discourse as a “controversy [...that] has been distorted by a blurring of what constitute legitimate issues, including human, media, labor, and LGBTQ+ rights, and the integrity about the Qatari bid; bias, prejudice, and sour grapes cloaked in questions about Qatar’s size, climate, and soccer legacy” (Dorsey, *Middle East Journal*, 76(2), 265–272, 2022, p. 271). Yet, to Qatar, this looked like an orchestrated campaign routed in cultural biases, colonial sentiments, and the jealousy of an arrogant West. Simultaneously, Qatar wanted to impress the West with their perfect organization of the event. Therefore, how did it negotiate the images conveyed in Western

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discourse? This analysis will shed light on this question by focusing on the immediate reactions of the Qatari media to a Western discourse that was perceived as hostile. We first present our conceptual framework, highlight the role of sports events in gaining attention in general, and place Qatar's strategic public diplomacy approach into perspective. In addition, a postcolonial reading of the production and negotiation of cultural images within these strategies is carved out. Next, we outline the broader patterns of the Western discourse toward Qatar in the run-up and during the World Cup, exemplified by German media discourse, to gain an impression of what the Qatari media might react to. We then outline our methodology, which involved a qualitative content analysis of three sets of Qatari media, before presenting the results. We close with a discussion of the results.

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## 1 Conceptual Framework

### 1.1 Sports Events and International Image Branding

Massive sports events always attract international attention (Panagiotopolou, 2011; Zeng et al., 2011). Yet, for attention-seeking countries, this is a double-edged sword. While international media attention increases in relation to massive sports events, it is difficult to remain in control of the images produced by foreign media outlets—particularly in the context of Western journalism, with its tradition of muckraking and self-understanding as a critical watchdog. This is particularly true for countries that are labeled authoritarian or not belonging to the Western hemisphere, such as China (which hosted the Olympics in 2008 and 2022), Russia (which hosted the Olympics in 2014 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018), and Brazil (which hosted the Olympics in 2016 and the FIFA World Cup in 2014). Yet, previous studies have shown that while a critical perspective toward the host country can be dominant before the event, the coverage can turn more positive during the actual event (Zeng et al., 2011). While this might be an effect that the host country is hoping for, in Schallhorn's (2017) study on the German coverage and recipients' perceptions of Brazil hosting the World Cup in 2014, the negative media portrayal of a brown lawn or bad infrastructure remained as meta-messages in recipients' minds.

## 1.2 Qatar and Its Public Diplomacy

Despite these potential problems related to image distortion, Qatar has set out to use its financial power to strengthen its brand worldwide. Starting in 1996, the TV channel Al-Jazeera, which was the first specialized pan-Arab news channel running news around the clock, became *the* symbol of a new kind of political coverage in the Arab world. Through this move, Qatar became well-known and a key player in the region. It also became visible in the West, albeit accompanied by strong criticism (Samuel-Azran, 2013).

Yet, Al-Jazeera and Qatar's way of performing public diplomacy became particularly interesting once Qatar attempted to hold a new role in international politics (Khatib, 2013). The interests of Qatar behind its proactive foreign policy were meant to "brand Qatar as different from its neighbors and to make itself valuable (if not indispensable) to multiple regional and international actors" (Sons & Wiese, 2015, p. 14).

In addition to its international and regional political engagement, foreign direct investments became a major tool of Qatar "to enlarge their political leverage" (Szalai, 2019, p. 157). The 2008 financial crisis in Europe led to a new openness of the European Union (EU) toward foreign direct investments, including from state funds such as Qatar's. Qatar's main investment agency, Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), purchased major shares of European brands such as LVMH, Porsche, Barclays Bank, and the London Stock Exchange, to name a few, while the sports-related Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) agency created and enlarged the beIN sports network and purchased, for example, major shares of the French football club Paris Saint-Germain. Qatar Airways also sponsored football clubs such as FC Barcelona and the German FC Bayern München.

Alongside "hard" politics, starting in 2007, several soft power efforts were made to "create themselves into Western imagination" and "project themselves into the West" (Maziad & Khatib, 2019, p. 1). Maziad (2019) claimed that between 2005 and 2010, "Qatar's 'smallness' was positively translated into agility, flexibility, and youthfulness" (p. 108). This image—at least among political and economic elites—also helped to win Qatar the bid for the FIFA World Cup in 2010 (Cooper & Momani, 2011). Simultaneously, in the West, Qatar's public and mediated image was rather negative. Rachid Chaker (2019) spoke of "Gulf bashing" in France (p. 69) as a result of Qatar's attempts to invest in France's strategic industries. The creation of the beIN sports channel, as well as the purchase of the football club Paris Saint-Germain, reinforced Qatar's image of wanting "to buy France" (Chaker, 2019, p. 69). Due to the perception of such strategies as invasive and arrogant, in

Western countries in general, Qatar remains the distant and exotic other who seems to solve problems with money. At the same time, as Maziad and Khatib (2019) put it, many Gulf states—including Qatar—have made their strategies “without adequate attempts for convergence on shared societal values between these [the West and the Gulf] two parts of the world” (p. 2).

### 1.3 Image Negotiations in a Postcolonial Context

While strategic misconduct might be one part of the explanation for Qatar’s distorted image in the West, a cultural bias and othering toward Qatar as a self-declared Islamic and Arab country might be another explanation.

The concept of othering became prominent with the postcolonial writings of Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Edward Said ([1978] 1995). By analyzing the Western perception of the ‘East’ or the ‘Orient,’ they determined that a discursive construction of the other as inferior dominates both fictional and non-fictional writing, reinforcing a societal discourse of superiority in the Western hemisphere. The concept ultimately refers to the fact that power relations can be discursively constructed and reinforced, resulting in othering as a “process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’ [...] and through which social distance is established and maintained” (Lister, 2004, p. 101).

Arab and Islamic countries are prototypes of Western othering. Numerous studies have proven that Islam is generally considered a backward and problematic religion—or even an ideology (Hafez & Schmidt, 2020; Miladi, 2021). Moreover, for decades, the MENA region has been shaken by militant conflicts that shaped its image as a problematic space complete with violence, extremism, and despotic ruling (Hafez, 2002).

Additionally, from a Western perspective, the self-description of being Islamic and Arab places a country like Qatar amid the Global South, which corresponds to what Stuart Hall has described as “the rest” of the world in contrast to a seemingly superior “West” (Hall, 1994). Said ([1978], 1995) had already shown that processes of othering in the media are often characterized by stereotypical dichotomic attributions such as own/alien, good/bad, or morally superior/inferior, which ultimately create an ‘us vs. them’ logic. Hall (1994) added a list of possible discursive strategies that substantiate the logic of othering. First, he highlighted the “tendency to impose European categories and norms” (Hall, 1994, p. 215) to assess the ‘other’ from a normatively superior perspective—a strategy that could also be labeled as “moral imperialism.” Another strategy, which he called “rituals of degradation” (Hall, 1994, p. 213), was meant to highlight the “barbarous and depraved charac-

ter” of the other. A typical discursive strategy is also a “failure to recognize and to respect difference” (Hall, 1994, p. 215) (i.e., not to acknowledge the value in a different way of handling life). Additionally, we can borrow from Spivak (1988) to identify a fourth strategy that is now often labeled as “applying double standards” (i.e., judging the other for misbehavior that is or has also been in one’s own repertoire). Spivak’s (1988) famous observations of Brits in India as “white men [who] are saving brown women from brown men” (p. 92) are important here. While the British demonized the Hindu *sati* (the burning of widows at the stake) as barbarian, they neglected their own structural mistreatment of women.

Based on our conceptual framework, we can conclude that the self-positioning that Qatar aims for will ultimately be confronted with these strategies in the discursive reading of its public diplomacy by Western audiences. In the next step, we will identify how this took shape by taking a cursory look at German media discourse as an example. We then turn to our main research question by investigating the reactions shown in Qatari media and whether the reactions pertain to the strategies identified above and the specific themes used in Western discourse.

#### 1.4 Qatar’s Image in Western Public Discourse During the World Cup

The German public and its political elites seem to have been among the fiercest critics of Qatar hosting the World Cup. Football fans publicly declared their boycott of watching the games, while sports bar owners would turn off the popular public viewing on TV. German public service television aired numerous pieces in the run-up to the World Cup, with headlines such as “Qatar: Why?”, “World Cup of lies: How FIFA is sugarcoating Qatar”, “Qatar: World Cup of shame”, “Secret matter Qatar”, “Secret Qatar”, and “The scandal World Cup.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in German discourse, different strands were interwoven, with “rituals of degradation” coming to the forefront. Notably, even legitimate critique was underpinned with strong othering. For example, columnists called Qatar “the alleged rogue state” (Töllner, 2022) or “a shithole with Sharia” (Blome, 2022). However, the criticism rarely tackled Qatar’s international politics or relations with Islamists. The main focus was on Qatar using bribery as a political means, thus “buying” the economy, sports, and even fans (Pilz, 2022). The revealing of alleged bribery by Qatar in the EU Parliament during the final days of the World Cup was seen as a confirmation of this image (Kelnberger & Meiler, 2022). Most commentators high-

<sup>1</sup>All Arabic and German quotes have been translated into English by the authors.

lighted an alleged Qatari arrogance and a completely different value system, such as a commentator who became uptight about “that embarrassing PR stunt by the Emir of Qatar, who put a Qatari robe on Messi at the moment of his greatest happiness to send a final ‘f\*\*k you’ to the world: We bought all this junk here, we decide how it ends” (Scheuermann, 2022).

These obvious “rituals of degradation” were tied in with another discursive strand that was characterized by outright colonial sentiments and cultural ignorance, strongly misrecognizing difference in Hall’s sense. The notion of a FIFA World Cup “in the desert” was used many times to alienate Qatar as a place for “normal” football. For example, ‘normal’ was connected to holding a tournament in the European summertime because Germans would otherwise be deprived of ‘our’ traditional habits of public football viewing while drinking beer (Neuscheler, 2022). A second meaning of “football in the desert” referred to the alleged lack of interest in football among the Qatari people in particular, and Arabs and Muslims more generally (Völker, 2022). During the tournament, the unprecedented success of the Moroccan team and its huge pan-Arab fandom somewhat surprised German commenters (Gorris, 2022). Yet, the idea that football is ‘ours’ and not ‘theirs’ prevailed in the discourse.

The strongest discursive strand referred to human rights and their importance in Qatar, or as Töllner (2022) put it, Qatar’s “medieval ideas on morality” and “laws that trample all over human rights.” The issue of guest workers was a dominant topic that shaped Western and German discourse since Qatar’s bid for the World Cup. In the discourse, references to “slavery” were not uncommon when the media spoke about the treatment of guest workers, emphasizing that “there is tons of blood in this World Cup” (Feldenkirchen, 2022). Even without this strong allegation, the impression of highly problematic conditions was permanently reproduced.

The second major issue that shaped Western discourse was LGBTQ rights and the treatment of these individuals in Qatar. A major blow occurred when Khaled Salman, a Qatari ambassador of the World Cup, said that homosexuality is a “damage in the mind” in a German TV report (Friedrichs & Breyer, 2022). Using a German football player’s statement, it was ultimately rejected that this was “an idea of a man from a different millennium” (Armbrecht, 2022). Although football does not play a pioneering role in normalizing LGBTQ players in its own ranks (Feddersen, 2022), German discourse strongly attributed such a pioneering mission to the World Cup and the teams (Sutera, 2022). The ‘One Love’ armband in rainbow colors that some teams wanted to wear during their games became a major focus in the German media. When FIFA banned this armband as “political,” the German team players made a keep-your-mouth-shut gesture in a group picture before their game against Japan to protest against this ban. During the same game, the

German minister of interior, Nancy Faeser, nevertheless wore the One Love armband. Both symbolic gestures were praised in the German media as powerful signs of resistance to FIFA and a statement to Qatari society (Ahrens, 2022). Only the conservative media outlet FAZ, which is said to be close to the business community, emphasized the damage this might have had on German-Qatari business relations (Ehrhardt, 2022a) and generally feared that “Qatar might not need us so badly” after all (Ehrhardt, 2022b).

To be fair, the protest attempts of German players and politicians were sometimes also ridiculed in German media as expressions of hypocrisy. In particular, left-wing media such as taz also contained some paragraphs and comments highlighting racist attitudes and a lack of intercultural competency in German coverage (Monir, 2022). However, this remained marginal in an overall discourse of strong othering and biased reporting.

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## 2 Methodology

We will now look at the Qatari media's reactions by analyzing which discursive patterns of argumentation were taken up and whether and how the Qatari media reflected the Western construction of 'ours' and 'theirs'. Given Qatar's interest in creating a positive image in the West, we might expect a somewhat defensive discursive strand. Simultaneously, a stronger postcolonial positioning and the identification of Qatar as both Arab and Muslim—and thus part of the Global South—might have also shaped the nature of reactions.

We also expect that the nature of the discourse differs depending on the targeted public. Therefore, we include three sets of media reaction samples: (1) media targeting the Arab Qatari public; (2) media targeting the pan-Arab public; (3) media targeting the Western English-speaking public worldwide. In Qatar, a distinct set of media exists for each of the aforementioned public groups. First, there are four nationally published Arabic newspapers that are all pro-government and have close links to the ruling family (Galal, 2021, p. 132). Among those, we selected Al-Sharq, which belongs to Dar Al-Sharq, the most prominent and influential media organization in Qatar (Dar Al-Sharq, 2023). Al-Sharq newspaper is the largest daily Arabic newspaper in Qatar (Al-Sharq Portal, 2023). The opinion articles from Al-Sharq's website will help us to learn more about which self-image of Qatar is (re)produced and how the state of Qatar wants its citizens to negotiate Western allegations. Second, we include Al-Jazeera Arabic's website to detect image negotiation among the pan-Arab public, which is considered a cultural ally due to an alleged ethnic and religious kinship. Al-Jazeera Arabic might choose to refer to

allyship even though there are contested relationships with many countries in the MENA region. Third, Al-Jazeera English's website is our choice for learning about how the Qataris aim to portray their image to the West. Samuel-Azran already (2013, p. 1298) confirmed that Al-Jazeera Arabic is mainly used by Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa, while Al-Jazeera English finds its audience in the US and the West. Simultaneously, we look at all three media outlets as public diplomacy tools of Qatar, following Samuel-Azran, who stated that "a state-sponsored station operates independently in routine affairs, which gives it the credibility of a privately owned station, and reverts to state-sponsored-style broadcasting only during a crisis involving the state. [...] thus allowing its operator to regain control over the narratives transmitted to the world with high impact." (2013, pp. 1294 and 1298).

We saved opinion articles from the three media websites that were published in the run-up to, during, and shortly after the World Cup, thus including articles from November 1 to December 31, 2022. The articles had to include "World Cup," "Qatar 2022," and "German\*" in English or Arabic as a keyword in their text. Thus, our sample is composed of a very high number (173) of opinion articles from Al-Sharq, while only 20 opinion pieces published by Al-Jazeera Arabic and 8 by Al-Jazeera English have been included. This disparity already indicates that the self-reassurance of Qatari nationals against the allegations was a much higher priority than outward communication to the West.

We used qualitative content analysis to detect major discursive patterns and lines of argumentation pertaining to an image creation of 'us' vs. 'them'. With regard to qualitative content analysis, we referred to Kuckartz (2016), who suggested the first step of an in-depth reading of the material and an initial coding of relevant phrases that pertain to the research questions. Given the previous cursory analysis of the German media discourse, we focused on whether and what kind of reactions there were to Qatar being an authoritarian country, its Arab-Islamic constituency, and the issues relating to its treatment of guest workers and the LGBTQ community. We marked the respective phrases in the material. In the second step, these initial codes were reviewed, systematized, and summarized to identify distinct patterns of argumentation.

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### 3 Results

Our data show two main discursive patterns of reactions. The first pattern, "Qatar is spearheading an Arab renaissance against a declining West," was found almost exclusively in the two Arabic-speaking media outlets, and particularly in the na-

tional Qatari newspaper *Al-Sharq*. This was strongly—but rather implicitly—triggered by the Western discourse and thus more of a self-assurance of Qatari cultural identity.

The second pattern, “Deconstructing a Western (colonialist, racist, hypocritic) campaign against Arabs and Islam,” explicitly aimed to counter Western allegations, particularly the alleged human rights violations against guest workers and LGBTQ people, by drawing on a variety of arguments. We detected a distinction here between the national Qatari *Al-Sharq* and the two *Al-Jazeera* websites.

### 3.1 Discursive Pattern 1: Qatar Is Spearheading an Arab Renaissance Against a Declining West

In the two Arabic-speaking media outlets, Qatar was presented as spearheading the renaissance of the Arab world, or even the “Arab nation.” In particular, toward the end of the tournament, when everything seemingly turned out to be successfully organized, this discursive pattern became strong. The two Arabic-speaking media outlets presented the tournament explicitly as an “Arab” success, thereby attempting to build the image of a unified region, with Qatar in the middle of it. *Al-Sharq* often highlighted the words “culture,” “civilization,” “peace,” and “tolerance” as the internal Arab values connected to this success. The newspaper self-assured readers several times that “Arabs have proven, through the generous Qatari people, that this nation is a great nation, respects civilizations and cultures, has a capacity for diversity and respect for others. It is a generous nation, and has humanitarian and Islamic principles that any nation with rationality and wisdom would wish for” (Al-Humaiqani, 2022). It was hoped that “the World Cup could turn into the moment when Arab civilization resumed its glory” (Al-Kuwari, 2022a) because the world would now be aware of these values. *Al-Jazeera Arabic* seconded this notion by arguing that “indeed, this is restoring confidence to the Arabs in their potential and capabilities” (Al-Kuwari, 2022b) and that the event represents a “victory in rebuilding the mental image for the State of Qatar, the Arabs, and their values and issues” (Abdelhadi, 2022). *Al-Jazeera Arabic* strongly highlighted the “pride,” “respect,” and “confidence” of Arabs concerning Qatar.

Yet, the two Arab-speaking media outlets in many comments implicitly and explicitly highlighted Qatar’s specific and seemingly altruistic role in the claimed process of restoring the Arab nation. *Al-Sharq* used a statement from the Qatari minister of foreign affairs saying that “this makes us, as Qataris, feel proud of the success of small Qatar in uniting the Arabs” (Al-Shaiji, 2022b), while *Al-Jazeera Arabic* clarified that it was the “Emir [who] declared from day one that the World

Cup is not the World Cup of Qatar but rather the World Cup of Arabs” (Abdelhadi, 2022). In doing so, they subtly reminded their Arab readers that the ‘us’ in the Arab renaissance is not as inclusive as it might seem since it is Qatar who has the means to confront ‘them’ (the West) and create an ‘us’ on its own particular terms. This refers to the setbacks that Qatar has faced in its image creation in the Arab region due to its involvement in several conflicts, which have resulted in Qatar being blockaded by some of its neighbors. from 2017–2021.

Simultaneously, this self-assurance about an Arab renaissance targets the seemingly hurt mindset of the Arab people, who saw themselves as inferior in Western politics and media for a long time. This becomes obvious when looking at arguments that clearly positioned the soon-to-be-renaissance as a success against the Western prejudice and bias that had weakened the self-image of Arabs. Accordingly, Al-Sharq concluded that “Qatar succeeded in organizing the World Cup and changed the negative mental image of Arabs and Muslims” (Al-Qudaidi, 2022c). This statement is similar to that of Al-Jazeera Arabic, whose commentator argued that “this edition of the World Cup has rekindled hope in Arabs’ ability to keep up with the world civilization. This provocative success for all racists in the world has enabled Arabs and Muslims to abandon the image that surrounded their thinking about their role in the world. This image is an orientalist image that the colonial West deliberately depicts us and forces us to believe that it is ‘our truth’” (Al-Kuwari, 2022b). In general, this discursive pattern was largely ignored in comments on the website of Al-Jazeera English. Only once it hoped that “the World Cup could help decolonise biased thinking about Arab and Muslim societies by using their diverse cultures to enrich the global experience of football” (Sadiki, 2022).

While both Arabic-speaking media outlets attempted to comfort the Arab “mentality,” it was only Al-Sharq that also identified (or rather expected) a decline in Western superiority, as symbolized by Qatar’s success. They presented Europe to its readers as an “elderly continent [that] still does not understand that everything it does is nothing but desperate attempts, such as trying to revive a dead person or breathe a soul into his body” (Al Saad, 2022a), argued that “Western civilization is clearly living through the penultimate stage ... to rid itself and the Earth from the intellectual, moral, and ethical pollution resulting from this civilization” (Al-Emadi, 2022), and claimed that “the West is aware that what is happening in front of it are harbingers of the imminent demise of the Western leadership of humankind” (Al-Emadi, 2022). However, this seemed to be an inner-Qatari discourse that was not shared by Al-Jazeera Arabic as a more outward-oriented media channel.

### 3.2 Discursive Pattern 2: Deconstructing a Western (Colonialist, Racist, Hypocritic) Campaign Against Arabs and Islam

The second main discursive pattern can be identified as fierce reactions to what was identified as outright Western campaigns against Qatar. All three media outlets featured this pattern, albeit with somewhat different foci. The Western political and media discourse was seen as an attempt of the West to construct a superior 'other' against an Arab-Islamic entity, which the Qatari media identified as 'us.' Several countries were particularly addressed as main protagonists of the West, such as Germany, France, the UK, and the US; however, quite often, "the white men," "Western supremacy," "Christian countries," and "colonial powers" were pointed to, thereby mixing national, racial, ethnic, religious, and historical arguments to an intersectional critique of power asymmetries. Yet, this intersectional critique seemed to be rather erratic and not systematically articulated.

Several articles, particularly in Al-Sharq, highlighted the seemingly forgotten colonial past of Western countries and the crimes they committed, reminding their readers in ever stronger words of the atrocities the West had committed to 'us,' referring to Arabs and the Global South more generally:

The culture of the white man who exploited the country and the people did not allow them to develop and civilize, except in the way he desires and within the limits that he allows. (Al Saad, 2022a)

They need to remind themselves of their miserable reality in practicing racism and restricting human rights of expression and even to wear whatever clothes a person wants in accordance with his/her religion and cultural heritage. They need someone to remind them of their blatant hypocrisy. (Hayajneh, 2022)

These reckless Western attitudes have brought back to us the image of colonial empires. Western cultural discourse is steeped in racism despite its claims of respect for cultures and support for peoples. (Al-Kuwari, 2022a)

This led to numerous examples that aimed to highlight the double standards that Western politicians, societies, and media outlets apply when it comes to human rights violations. Both historical and recent examples were used and sometimes presented in detail. One long piece mentioned the millions of victims of the Crusades (Al-Qudaïdi, 2022b), while another mentioned the lack of support for the Palestinians by the West (Al-Shaiji, 2022a), concluding that "Western double standards toward our issues are no longer acceptable and [that the West] lectures us

about what they have been practicing for centuries without apology. We also have to remind them of their bloody colonial past” (Al-Shaiji, 2022a). Similarly, in one long comment citing several (Western) experts, Al-Jazeera English argued that “the point of calling out Western criticisms is ... to highlight the massive hypocrisy that is on display when countries that continue to commit more human rights abuses than Qatar could ever dream of decide to unilaterally award themselves the moral high ground” (Fernández, 2022).

All media outlets mentioned the previous 2018 World Cup in Russia. Al-Sharq concluded that the previous World Cup was not as heavily criticized as Qatar’s because “Russia in the end is part of the Christian world” (Al-Emadi, 2022). A reference to double standards based on religious differences was taken up by Al-Jazeera Arabic, which argued that European countries “prevent Muslim citizens from building mosques for worship or from building minarets for these mosques, claiming that such construction clashes with the environment of Western culture” or the French state, which “prevents French Muslim women from wearing the hijab” (Salah, 2022). All of this is characterized as an expression of the “cultural arrogance based on the inevitability of the white man’s supremacy” (Salah, 2022), resulting in a “Western view in general and the European view in particular, which looks down on non-white people in the first place and to Muslims in the second” (Sarmini, 2022). In doing so, a general discourse was established that aimed to delegitimize any claims by ‘them’ toward ‘us’ due to ‘their’ crimes against ‘us’ in the past and present. While Al-Jazeera English mirrored this discourse in general, one commentator attempted to find an explanation for its persistence in the media beyond historical guilt and cultural arrogance by pointing to a lack of diversity in Western newsrooms: “Reactions from several pundits and journalists have reflected ... racism and Islamophobia .... But they also underscored the lack of diversity that marks most Western newsrooms—which limits their ability to comprehend much of the world beyond stilted stereotypes” (Twaij, 2022).

Furthermore, this general discourse was built on when reacting to the main allegations toward Qatar of violating the human rights of guest workers and LGBTQ people. However, these two discursive sub-patterns were differently shaped and played out differently in the three media outlets.

### **3.3 Sub-Pattern: LGBTQ Rights**

The issue of LGBTQ rights was very prominently covered in Al-Sharq, and related allegations were addressed in a rather simplistic way. It argued that homosexuality might “destroy the family foundation” (Hayajneh, 2022), “contradicts natural in-

stincts” (Al Ibrahim, 2022), and is “forbidden by Islamic law and the divine religions while also being hostile to human nature” (Al-Shaiji, 2022a). Al-Sharq also referred to the philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who had claimed that “deviant moral behavior is the path to civilizational collapse” (Al-Emadi, 2022) and thus projected that “therefore, everything collapsed: chastity falls, shyness dissolves, and nobility goes. This is the real bankruptcy and loss” (Al Ibrahim, 2022). The argumentation here is very defensive, referring to ‘our’ specific and seemingly superior value system, implying that not respecting this system might lead to chaos. Here, ‘our’ is strongly defined as “Islamic,” but interestingly, there are also references to “a third of European countries [that] reject homosexuality” (Al Saad, 2022b), thereby creating a discursive alliance with conservative Christian governments in Europe. The value system referred to here might thus not be as distinctly ‘ours’ (Islamic) as it is presented, but it aims to reassure readers that cultural conservatism is the right choice.

On the other hand, both Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Jazeera English did not attempt to prove that homosexuality was not part of ‘our’ value system. Instead, they engaged in a discussion about the universalism of values and charged the West with imposing its values on others. Al-Jazeera Arabic argued that “Western media chooses a simplistic formula disguised as a human rights approach” (Kharsa, 2022) and stated that “homosexuality is a brazen attempt to politicize sports to impose divisive values between communities and nations” (Aloush, 2022). Furthermore, it is said that “this reflects an effort to standardize the world, impose a single vision of the world and the values guiding human and social relations. This pattern eliminates the differences and pluralism in viewpoints and takes us toward totalitarianism in imposing cultural and identity choices on peoples and societies” (Alam, 2022). An expert cited in one of the pieces on Al-Jazeera English’s website went even further when speaking of Arab homosexuality: “People who are ‘parachuting into Qatar to lecture them about gay rights’, Zarrinnal [the expert] said, are ignorant of the long history of homosexuality in the Arab world, which is ‘reflected in their poetry, visual art, and social history’. He continued to describe how Western powers, now with their footballers at the vanguard, have instead reduced the panorama to a simplistic narrative of repression—salvation from which depends entirely on whether Arab homosexuality can be ‘molded into the same LGBTQ identities they have in their own countries’” (Fernández, 2022). In doing so, the Western demand of respecting cultural diversity was turned into a specific interpretation by the two media outlets, which namely emphasized that ‘their’ values might not necessarily be ‘our’ values and that this needs to be accepted and respected. Thus, a clear dichotomy between the West and ‘us’ (Muslims/Global Southerners) is also

drawn here, but by using postcolonial arguments instead of culturalist ones to justify this position.

### 3.4 Sub-Pattern: Guest Workers' Rights

The argumentation regarding guest workers' rights differed from the debate about LGBTQ rights, while also varying between the media outlets. In contrast to its rhetoric regarding the LGBTQ issue, Al-Sharq highlighted that Qatar has successfully met the demands of Western actors, thus somewhat recognizing that those demands are justified. It fished for praise by comparing Qatar's success to Western role models by "stressing that the country's wise leadership has succeeded in making Doha the 'Geneva of the twenty-first century'" (Al-Qudaidi, 2022a). Simultaneously, examples such as "the Qatari government has proven that workers have rights that go beyond what workers in the European countries themselves have" (Al-Abdullah, 2022) show how 'we' (Qataris) have even done it better than 'them' (Europe). It also reassured its readers that "Qatar is at the forefront of the countries that preserve the rights and dignity of workers" (Al-Mulla, 2022), while it does not forget to point to the seemingly forgotten historical guilt of the West, by which "tens of thousands of people in its colonies in Asia and Africa were driven to dig tunnels building road and train networks with whips and weapons. Thousands of workers died during work" (Al-Emadi, 2022).

Again, both Al-Jazeera Arabic and English did not follow Al-Sharq in its somewhat overstretched claims about how modern and progressive Qatar is and instead highlighted the double standards of the West toward global workforces. Al-Jazeera Arabic claimed that the West's "[reduction of] an extremely complex and overlapping issue such as the migrant workers of West Asia to a purely Qatari problem involves a clear duplicity.... It also includes structural problems associated with globalized and cross-border capitalism, which produced this phenomenon. This is known as the racist system of employment, which is an old legacy that Western companies themselves are keen to perpetuate" (Kharsa, 2022). It expanded this discussion on "Europe's own lethally xenophobic anti-migration policy" (Fernández, 2022) since it "opens the discussion on the often immoral dealings of European countries in many cases with immigrants. Thousands of immigrants died at sea while trying to reach Europe and were not given a chance to search for another life while the Gulf opens its doors to Asian labor. There is no doubt that the conditions of these workers are not ideal but working in the Gulf helped many Asian workers build a new life" (Aloush, 2022).

Thus, as a conclusion on these sub-patterns, it can be said that in Al-Sharq, reactions to the allegation of Qatar violating or neglecting the rights of LGBTQ people are connected to an emphasis on a different, “conservative,” or “Islamic” value system, while the reactions to the debate about guest workers’ treatment and rights are characterized by the notion that ‘they’ do not see ‘our’ progress and the legal reforms and measures that Qatar has taken in this regard. Al-Sharq obviously emphasized the moral imperialism felt in the Western allegations to convince its audience. Al-Jazeera Arabic and English presented their arguments in a more sophisticated manner and highlighted the double standards used by the West, which seems to forget its own responsibility and role by including references to a neoliberal world order and the remnants of a colonial past that continue to shape the West’s policies.

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## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The fierce Western criticism against Qatar before and during its hosting of the World Cup took it by surprise. Although experience and research tell us that global attention to the host of a massive sports event can be a mixed blessing, particularly for non-Western states, the intensity of the criticism—especially regarding the “rituals of degradation”—in Western media was unprecedented. Indeed, with its foreign policy actions and global economic investments over the past two decades, Qatar has raised suspicion and criticism, not only in Europe and the US but also in other Arab countries. Yet, the large amount and different types of allegations Qatar faced in Western media, which we have proven in our cursory analysis of the German media, must have seemed like an orchestrated campaign routed in the cultural biases, colonial sentiments, and moral superiority of an arrogant West.

In our analysis of the reactions in Qatari media, we identified what we could call a “rally round the flag” effect. This concept refers to the media and public opinion supporting their national governments in situations of national crises or threats, even though they might be critical of them at other times (Mueller, 1970). Yet, we also expected that the discursive patterns of the reactions might differ depending on the target public of the Qatari media. Qatar-sponsored media is particularly interesting since it has national Arabic outlets, pan-Arab media, and media that target the Western public in English, to which it also aims to convey different messages. In our analysis, we have seen that the Western allegations stimulated a particularly strong focus on ‘us’ (as Arabs and Muslims), a discursive pattern that was almost exclusively found in both Arabic-speaking media outlets. This has triggered the construction of a particular identity mix of Arab, Global Southern, and Islamic that

turned the negative allegations into something to be proud of. This discursive pattern was created to remind the pan-Arab target audiences that Qatar has helped them to overcome its negative image from previous decades. While Al-Jazeera Arabic emphasized the unity of Arabs, the national Al-Sharq newspaper inevitably pointed to the leadership role of Qatar in changing this image.

The second overarching discursive pattern attempted to deconstruct what was perceived as a Western campaign against Qatar. All three media outlets—national, pan-Arab, and English—featured many comments and analyses that relied on this pattern. Interestingly, both Al-Jazeera websites identified Stuart Hall’s discursive strategies of creating an exotic and even dangerous ‘other’ in Western media discourse and then reacted to this. They accused the Western media of moral imperialism, using double standards, and misrecognizing—or rather not accepting—cultural differences. In sophisticated comments, they deconstructed dominant Western allegations with regard to human rights as hypocrisy by using postcolonial lines of argumentation. While not being weaker in their condemnation of Western attitudes, they allowed Western readers to critically reflect on the Western position. On the other hand, the national Qatari newspaper Al-Sharq meandered between emphasizing alleged Islamic (conservative) values as being opposed to Western (liberal) values when it discussed the allegations of not respecting LGBTQ rights, and searching for praise by referring to Qatar’s convergence to Western standards in terms of economic development and the treatment of guest workers.

Our analysis indicates that the Qatari media have indeed reacted to Western allegations and used different discursive strategies according to the variety of target publics—in the Arab world with Al-Jazeera Arabic and in the West with Al-Jazeera English. Interestingly, the Western allegations also stirred a strong identity debate in the national media, resulting in a clear distinction between ‘us’ (Qatari Muslim Arabs) and ‘them’ (Westerners), which might have a stronger impact on the position and tone of the more outward-oriented media outlets in the long run.

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# “And Why the Hell Are You Watching the Game? We’ve All Agreed to Boycott”: Co-orientation During the World Cup in Qatar 2022

# 14

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## 1 Introduction

In the everyday lives of many people, sport is ubiquitous. At work and among family and friends, sporting achievements and major sporting events, as well as their political dimensions, can become a means of bonding or the subject of controversial debate. As the global significance of sport in general and soccer in particular continues to grow, broadcasts of major sporting events have become a central part of everyday life, as an opportunity for transcultural exchange. These events and their associated media coverage provide entertainment, contribute to community building and integration and strengthen identification with the values of sport (cf. Bilings & Wenner, 2017, p. 3f.). Global sporting events have an impact beyond the immediate sporting event. Numerous studies show that young people in particular use social media while watching sports broadcasts in order to exchange information or to be more emotionally invested with their peers or larger online publics (cf. Rubenking & Lewis, 2016).

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In the following, we will outline how soccer fans discuss their media reception while it occurs. Specifically, we will look at Second-Screen use during the World Cup in Qatar. The social media content posted during the World Cup matches in Qatar offers initial insights into the negotiation of fandom under special, post-pandemic conditions.

Since the public was almost completely excluded from participating in (major) sporting events during the Covid-19 pandemic (cf. Gugutzer, 2020), social media platforms have given rise to new ways of media participation and -use (cf. Dehm & Storll, 2020; Hasebrink & Siebenaler, 2020), which ultimately also became relevant for the World Cup on a large scale for the networking and exchange of the global soccer audience, including national soccer fans and fan groups (Grix et al., 2020; Schallhorn & Kunert, 2020). The increased use of social media platforms during sports reception led to an increase in the importance of new intermediaries with which viewers, as recipients during live television broadcasts, classify the events via online comments (Lewis et al., 2017): Instead of a team of hosts or presenters during the broadcast and breaks, viewers are now also guided by members of the audience, who become visible online via social media postings (cf. for the 2014 World Cup Bixler & Friemel, 2017; for the 2018 World Cup Meier et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, the 2022 World Cup in Qatar represented a novelty in the history of international soccer broadcasting. Not only was it the first World Cup without a significant international audience in (newly built) stadiums, but it was also a tournament in a host country without a distinct soccer culture (see Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). The atmosphere on site was primarily the product of professional event organizers and financial sponsors, which led to the authenticity of the event being called into question internationally. Long-standing criticisms tied to Qatar being awarded hosting rights of the world cup (see Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Busse & Wildangel, 2022) led not only the media, politicians and academics, but also soccer fans and civil society groups to take a particularly critical view of the sport. This criticism was particularly directed at sports associations and officials (see Nieland et al., 2016; Mittag & Nieland, 2016; Hölzen & Meier, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The commercialization of soccer and the World Cup in particular led to FIFA's awarding policy being heavily criticized (Beyer & Schulze-Marmeling, 2021). Despite the lifting of pandemic lockdowns in 2022, Qatar as a location for the world cup (Busse & Wildangel, 2022) led to a similar situation for (traditional) soccer spectators as during the pandemic. The international soccer audience lacked many opportunities to support their teams on site and were therefore not visible as

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to criticism of sports policy and national and international sports associations (cf. e.g. Blaschke, 2020), there is also criticism of sports reporting (Nieland, 2023b).

loyal fans in the worldwide television broadcasts. Many fans were forced to watch the matches from home, while stadium rows were either empty or, as in the case of Qatar, filled with spectators unfamiliar to and with the European soccer community and its traditions. The only way for fans to communicate or connect with like-minded people in such a scenario was through social media, instant messaging or video calls. In this context, smartphones often functioned as a “Second Screen” to supplement the television experience on TV and to interact with each other (see Bixler & Friemel, 2017 for the 2014 World Cup; Meier et al., 2021 for the 2018 World Cup).

Taking the above into account, new possibilities arise for reception research to analyze the communication among soccer fans during live broadcasts. In this article, we build on a typology of second-screen uses of Bundesliga soccer broadcasts developed during the pandemic and extend it with our analysis of tweets during the World Cup. The theoretical background for this analysis is the concept of co-orientation (cf. Göttlich et al., 2017a, b, c).

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## 2 On the Concept of Co-orientation in Reception Research

The concept of co-orientation serves us in approaching the orientation of viewers and viewer groups who discuss or become aware of each other via Second Screen use. In principle, the question of the mutual orientation of viewers to their media offerings has always been prevalent in mass communication research. The role of media and media organizations in the formation of public opinion also cannot be understated. Media organisations shape societal orientations in regard to pivotal socio-political, sports-political and cultural events. The circumstance of communication media now playing an orientation role in media reception concerns all models of traditional media- and communication research, which for a long time were based on a classic mimetic understanding of representation: Therein, presented information is more so taken ‘as is’, and contradictory reports or assumptions are only addressed when projected attitudes do not form as expected (cf. Göttlich et al. 2017b: 11). In contrast, the media and, in particular, second- and multiscreen applications represent a new constellation for mutual orientation of media audiences, as their use brings contexts and understanding into focus that are not part of the main broadcast. The visibility of the audience among and for each other arises in a “virtual space”, which makes the corresponding new interpretative forms of exchange interesting, as can be observed, for example, in Second Screen applications or in the livestreaming scene (cf. Göttlich, 2023).

In this communication-sociological perspective, various forms of co-orientation are located or rooted in the everyday use of new media, which were not addressed in their diversity and breadth in current media developments and therefore also have not been sufficiently thematized in media- and communication research. At the same time, the reception of traditional media offerings has long been associated with various activities such as posting, streaming, sharing, voting, clicking, etc., these activities deserve a more thorough examination in the realm of reception and media use research.

In our analyses so far, we have grounded co-orientation on the theory of action—namely on selection logics for the creation of common situation definitions. From a sociological point of view and starting from a background of rational action theory, it can be stated that actors “only arrive at a stable image of their social environment - and of themselves - through certain forms of *co-orientation*, *symbolic interaction* or *communication* [...]” (Esser, 1999, p. 167, translated, emphasis in original). How such a co-orientation of audiences takes place in the context of media reception and the use of second and multi-screen applications must be further explored based on different media offerings. Further, this exploration should retain sensibilities for identity formation and the perception of self and others (cf. Göttlich et al., 2017b, p. 11). In the context of orientation towards the behaviour and actions of others, actors arrive at a stable image of their social environment and their self through communication and symbolic interaction, which implies an ongoing negotiation of roles and positions in social situations. The natural attitude implies that people act with the assurance of “the *shared* and ‘coordinated’ *mental orientation* to the *same* imagined model of action - without any further contact in the situation” takes place, i.e. is based on or anchored in this self-image (Esser, 1999, p. 229, translated, emphasis in original). How this relationship presents itself in the context of the use of new intermediaries in media reception has not yet been pursued in detail, especially for sports communication. The World Cup in Qatar, in which social and political criticism was a reoccurring theme, presents an ideal subject for examining whether and how criticism was reflected and manifested during the reception of football matches.

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### 3 Social Media Sports Communication for Live Events

The reception of sports content increasingly involves the simultaneous use of different media. Users consume highlights via YouTube or TikTok clips, comment on live events in real time on Twitter or produce their own content (cf. Billings & Brown, 2017; Utz, 2019) while watching television or live streams of sporting events. This practice leads to a de-linearization of sports consumption (Simmons

et al., 2021): Instead of passive watching, multitasking-based, interactive formats dominate and strengthen “fan engagement” (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Current developments also show that sport is increasingly merging with entertainment and new forms of participation are emerging, for example through trend sports and the integration of sport into hybrid lifestyles. At the same time, the gap between active and inactive consumers is growing, with younger target groups in closely linking sports experiences and team allegiances to personal identity.

The expansion and transformation of sports reporting through digital media has far-reaching effects on sport as a cultural field and as a business model. One key area of application is personalized advertising, in which usage data is instrumentalized to develop and apply precise targeting strategies. For example, jersey advertisements can be individually tailored and displayed based on location and interest profiles. Naturally, this development also brings with it considerable ethical challenges. Cyberbullying against athletes is becoming a growing problem. In addition, there are data leaks in fan tracking systems that could potentially reveal sensitive information and jeopardize user trust. These unresolved issues highlight the need to further develop data protection and ethical standards in the digital sports ecosystem to protect both athletes and fans.

The increasing use of social media during sports broadcasts has led to significant changes in the reception behaviour of sports fans (see Pegroaro, 2013; Billings & Brown, 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2019). Bowman and Crammer (2014, p. 214) emphasize that sports fans no longer merely obtain information about leagues or competitions online, but increasingly follow individual athletes. This intensified contact between fans and athletes increasingly extends to topics outside of sports (ibid., p. 218). Furthermore, fans generate their own content on social media (ibid., p. 215), which creates “intra-audience effects”, as “social media sports consumers are at least ambiently aware of each other” (ibid., p. 219). Gantz and Lewis (2014, p. 21; 24f.) describe the transition from a fandom shaped by traditional media to one influenced by ‘new media’: “new media allow users to become participants, not just consumers of mediated content” (ibid., p. 21). This development has far-reaching effects on sports reception experience and sports audiences (cf. Werron, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Hull and Lewis (2014) provide empirical evidence as to why Twitter is partially replacing television as a classic “broadcast sports media”. They show that “connected fans prefer a sense of community and find that Twitter creates a virtual community they value” (ibid., p. 25). In response to the increase in online communication during sports broadcasts, broadcasting producers such as DAZN, Sky and public broadcasters have recognized the importance of co-orientation for their audience. In addition to user-generated second-screening options, they have introduced their own alternatives such as the “Sky Couchkurve” or live

While sports broadcasts during the pandemic were described as occurring ‘without spectators’, fans often had a different experience, since they were using new or alternative intermediaries. Their postings became visible in a variety of ways, with only impressive or particularly eventful sports matches leading to a reduction in critical reactions and comments. Co-orientation took place on instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp or microblogging platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The negotiation of pandemic soccer provided an outlook of upcoming developments in sports reception, since it accelerated trends that already were in motion.

The UEFA European Football Championship, which ended in July 2021 and still took place under Covid restrictions, provided evidence of the role and position of different second and multi-screen usage patterns. Our Twitter analysis of key matches during the tournament showed that users quickly (in a span of weeks) became accustomed to their *new normal*. Co-oriented sports experiences quickly established themselves as a common way of watching sports (Göttlich et al., 2021a). The mutual visibility of sports watchers online created by peripheral social media not only contributed to the feeling of “having been there” but also played an important role in the participation and involvement of the national and international audience that could otherwise be experienced on site in stadiums (cf. Göttlich et al., 2021a, b). Covid restrictions have accelerated a process that Bowman and Crammer (2014) refer to as social media sport. Here, fans appear as mediatized participants in the event (see Werron, 2010; Majumdar & Naha, 2020; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Rowe, 2020; Grix et al., 2020). This development has far-reaching implications for the understanding of sports reception and participation in the digital era.

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## 4 Criticism of the World Cup in Qatar

In the run-up to the 2022 men’s<sup>3</sup> FIFA World Cup in Qatar, criticism, protest and resistance from fans against the excesses of modern soccer manifested themselves particularly in social media (Beyer & Schulze-Marmeling, 2021, p. 133ff.). This development reflects significant changes in the communication practices of sports

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podcasts and talk shows during matches. These curated offerings are more strongly geared towards broadcasters than the often program-critical user-generated second-screening communication .

<sup>3</sup>Every mention of the World Cup in this text refers to the men’s football tournament, as this event in particular receives world-wide attention and is therefore predominantly discussed on Second Screens.

fans and spectators in recent years (see Pegroaro, 2013; Clavio & Frederick, 2014; Gantz & Lewis, 2014; Billings & Brown, 2017). Social media not only enables fans to network internationally (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014), but also increasingly serves as a platform for organizing and making protest or dissent visible (Hill et al., 2016; Nieland, 2017; Hölzen & Meier, 2018; Meier et al., 2021). Interaction between fans and clubs has become an integral part of modern soccer, intensifying fan engagement and significantly increasing the reach of clubs.

The 2022 World Cup presented international soccer fans with complex decisions regarding their reception of the tournament. The absence of an established soccer culture in the host country, high travel costs and restrictions as well as political and moral concerns regarding human rights violations affected the perception of the event negatively. According to representative surveys, large sections of the German Population were in favour of boycotting the World Cup or at least the German national team's matches in the run-up to the event. Paradoxically, this led to a reinterpretation of fan identity: 'authentic' fans deliberately consumed the tournament from home or boycotted it, while stadium visitors were sometimes perceived as less authentic or immoral. The involvement of established TV channels and national sports organizations in the event was interpreted by many fans as complicity in Qatar's "sportswashing" (Grix & Holiham, 2014; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Meier et al., 2021), regardless of accompanying awareness and human rights campaigns.

The persistent and, in some cases, intensifying criticism during the tournament was a novelty. Low viewership statistics in the preliminary round (an average of 4.802 million viewers on ARD and ZDF, compared to 9.254 million at the 2018 World Cup in Russia) reflected the lack of interest and the mood of boycott among many soccer fans. Of course, the fact that the German national team did not achieve expected results in the eyes of fans further reinforced this negative perception.

In recent years, debates about the moral obligations of soccer fans have intensified in light of the increasing hyper-commercialization of sport (Gruneau & Horne, 2017), human rights violations and questionable politics (Zeyringer, 2021; Nieland, 2023a). With the increasing mediatization of soccer reception, the question arises as to how the perception of reception practices that traditionally take place in presence is changing through second and multi-screen use (Göttlich et al., 2017c; Göttlich, 2023). "Social media sport" (Bowman & Crammer, 2014) reaches new dimensions when reception itself is mediatized and digitally networked (Majumdar & Naha, 2020; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Rowe, 2020; Grix et al., 2020).

These developments underline the need for a differentiated analysis of the changing fan culture and reception practices in the context of major global sporting events. In particular, it is important to critically reflect on the effects

of digital media on forms of protest, fan identity and the social perception of sporting events.

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## 5 Research Questions and Methodological Approach

The concept of co-orientation in the context of second- or multi-screen use requires further empirical concretization for different genres and television events, for which we specifically turned to the FIFA World Cup from the end of October 2022 until the end of the tournament on 18 December 2022. With our field of interest, we address two central research questions in particular:

1. *Which topics were discussed by soccer viewers during the Second Screening of the World Cup?* The aim is to take stock of negotiation processes about events during the games and to identify core themes, debates and controversies.
2. *Does co-orientation in social media sports reception occur in a discursive manner or do fans mutually orient themselves through other means?* We investigate whether the mutual perception of users leads to a joint communicative negotiation of attitudes online during matches, or if audience members perceive the comments of other users in perhaps a lurking or isolated manner. The latter cases would not lead to coherent online discourse, but instead will either produce no comments, only lead to usage parameters like likes or retweets, or will birth individual that sports fans post irrespective of a broader, organized discourse. Findings in this area provide information on the extent to which judgments and criticism, but also common-sense attitudes, are expressed and possibly consolidated through Second Screening.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we first exploratively map topics and content addressed in Twitter communication to reveal attitudes that were prominently represented by viewers during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Popular tweets are subjected to a qualitative content analysis. Specifically, we home in on attitudes that are contrary to each other and therefore possibly require discursive negotiation. We operationalize these postings by typifying and contrasting them with each other.

To answer the second set of questions, we looked for longer discussion threads or tweets that generated many reactions from other viewers. If these user comments turned out to be isolated content, then a discursive negotiation of World Cup viewers during the Second Screening can be ruled out. However, that does not necessarily exclude the possibility for mutual perception of postings by fans. The

question then becomes whether or how fans co-orient themselves with other live-watchers.

During the 2022 FIFA World Cup, we scraped German and English-language tweets about the matches with German participation in the preliminary round as well as the elimination matches of the respective round of 16, quarter-finals, semi-finals and the final. The data was collected using SNScrape and Python. We also recorded the match broadcasts as videos. Our data was collected in two rounds, with different criteria: The first round of scrapings collected tweets published during specific match times. Hashtags for live commentary during the broadcast were provided by national associations and FIFA itself. 1,313,726 tweets on 11 individual matches, abbreviated by name under hashtags such as #GERESP & #ESPGER, represent the core data of the survey. A second survey collected asynchronous data published under hashtags that were consistent over several weeks and thus provided a point of contact for follow-up communication on the part of the user community. A total of 1,123,057 tweets were collected in overarching hashtags such as #Fifaworldcup, #Qatar2022 or #WorldCup. Both scrapings include Twitter data on the World Cup, but their contextual circumstances are different: Tweets posted *during* the matches deal more specifically with the match and the sports broadcast, while *persistent* hashtags tend to be used by fans for anticipatory or follow-up communication.

We also want to note that during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, access to tweets less restricted than it currently is. This is due to disproportionate paywalls for researchers that accompanied the transformation of the twitter platform into “X”. Due to the disintegration of Twitter’s existing organizational structures, requests for API access were no longer processed during its transitory phases in late 2022. For this reason, we used the external tool SNScrape to collect tweets. To nevertheless adhere to rigorous research ethics, we only stored superficial data such as user names, tweet content, number of likes, number of retweets and the time of posting—i.e. data that is visible, searchable and accessible even to users who were not logged into Twitter. More granular data such as friend networks, post history or geo-location were deliberately left out of our dataset.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Descriptive Findings & Qualitative Typing

In a first step, we searched tweets for standout topic and themes. Popular tweets were examined and categorized first. Keywords and key terms from the tweets were used to create whitelists, which were then used to further sift through the entire dataset. The whitelist search thus led to a collection of topics and positions that were found more frequently and in a similar form in various games. We subjected this filtered data to a qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA. In an initial sorting, six main topics emerged that were mentioned by Twitter viewers: Fandom, morality, interculturality, politics, sports and the broadcast itself.

<b>Fandom</b>	<b>Moral</b>	<b>Interculturality</b>
Authenticity	Activism	West and Middle East
Support	Boycott	Racism
<b>Politics</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Transmission</b>
Commercialization	GOAT debate	Production
Corruption	Referee decisions	Framing

Several lines of argumentation opened up within these categories. The category “fandom” was determined by comments on what makes an authentic football fan in the context of the World Cup. Tensions arise as soon as a distinction is made between spectators of regular season league matches and those who merely want to take part in the media spectacle of an international World Cup.

Come on people, this is not real fandom, just FOMO. 😞 #ArgentinaVsFrance

With “FOMO”, the commentary addresses the “fear of missing out”, which leads opportunistic viewers to follow a World Cup only because it has become an object of shared attention on a global scale—but not because of the sporting events or the will to support a team. Due to the visibility of World Cup hashtags in the trending topics on Twitter, viewers who were primarily interested in social media discourse surrounding the mega event (and not primarily in the TV broadcasts or matches themselves) also tuned in.

One point that was often discussed, particularly during the preliminary rounds of the World Cup, was the moral burden that the public experience of the world cup carried—or was supposed to carry. Based on the postings about the World Cup, we found that boycotts originally mentioned by the press and TV programs were perceived less strongly than originally expected. The image of a morally unacceptable World Cup, which was maintained in broadcasts and journalistic articles in the

weeks and months leading up to the tournament, turned out to be a framing of a situation that was not taken up by large sections of the public, or was already set aside in the first week of the event. This resulted in an incongruence between expected and actual audience behaviour.

Why is #QATECU trending? And why the heck are you watching the game? We've all agreed to boycott... #BoycottQatar2022

Now almost all of Germany is watching again. Boycott my ass. You traitors. #ESPGER [translated]

The phrase "we've all agreed on the boycott" is worth addressing: While a common-sense structure was established and maintained within traditional media outlets in the run-up to the World Cup, this framing falls apart for the author of the post when they become aware of a larger public that acts and presents itself in opposition to it. Co-orientation, or the visibility of fellow viewers online, dismantles the assumed frame of an audience that is hesitant to tune in at all due to human rights violations and corruption. As if the decision to boycott had previously followed a consensus, viewers on social media are now referred to as "traitors".

Greetings to all those who are boycotting the World Cup. You are really missing the best World Cup match of all time #FIFAWorldCup [translated]

Which columnist will be the first to say that this finale was almost worth the thousands of dead workers in the end? #FIFAWorldCup [translated]

Over the course of the World Cup and particularly due to the impressive finals being an impressive showing sporty-wise, a change of direction in the argumentation can be seen in the tweets posted: Towards the end of the World Cup, the FOMO of the spectators is confirmed or even verified. Watching is thus retrospectively framed or anticipated as a justifiable decision, since they would have otherwise been "missing the best world cup match of all time". Moral concerns that accompanied watching the World Cup are thus relativized.

The attempts by the DFB (German football association) and the German team to position their participation in the tournament as self-critical did not go down particularly well with online audiences. Their criticism reached a climax when the team presented themselves as victims of censorship with their mouths shut in a group photo before the game. In response to the ban on the German captain's armband (rainbow coloured like a pride flag), the DFB posted the photo on Twitter on 23.11.2022 with the sentence "Even without the armband. Our stance stands"

(Fig. 14.1, translated). The gesture attracted international attention but was largely viewed negatively by soccer fans on Twitter. In a rare occasion, the press release was commented on in a condescending manner, regardless of the audience's political views: Politically right-wing comments criticized the statement for its content, while left-wing replies address the hypocrisy of the activist gesture.

Imagine fighting against real censorship. In North Korea, China or Russia and then overpaid millionaires stage themselves as victims of it. #GERJPN #WMofShame

Go out and play soccer. Don't let yourselves be politically harnessed by the left-green and you'll win. Otherwise you are the moral champions of the world and can go home #ESPGER

Interculturality was particularly reflected in postings on cultural differences between the host country and Central European audiences. For once, European fans



**Fig. 14.1** DFB team on Twitter/X (2022)

were not represented in the stands of the stadium. Instead, mainly Qataris filled the ranks. Comments were directed against the strictly regulated behaviour of the local fans in terms of alcohol consumption or sexual orientation. The focus was on the fact that Qatar was not a soccer nation and that the venue was also unattractive for “real” fans to travel to. Qatari spectators in the stands were mocked in tweets by the Europeans who stayed at home. A frequent accusation was that only paid actors were present in the broadcasts:

I hope at least the Qatari “fans” get their money on time. #QATECU

By the way, I just opened a beer! Take that, you Qataris! #QATECU

Commenters of this type aim to differentiate themselves from ‘fake’ soccer fans in the stadium, which also authenticates the audience participating online as ‘real’. Spectators post demonstratively about their spectator behaviour in the living room, where they follow the sporting events according to their own rules. Accordingly, when a user opens a beer and posts about it, they are emphasizing their self-determination and freedom in contrast to the audience on site. The reception of the games at home was glorified by emphasizing the comfort, the low cost and, above all, the possibility of drinking alcohol during the games. In cases like these, there are shifts in relevance that run counter to traditional views of engaged sports audiences: it is usually the viewers at home on the couch who are labelled “passive”, “lazy” or “fake”.

All in all, a wonderful World Cup. From the quarter-finals onwards at the latest, all the games were top-class. The final was the best ever. Germany made a fool of itself with its cultural imperialism and wokeism. #FIFAWorldCup [translated]

In terms of interculturality, counter-narratives also opened up—especially in light of the elimination matches after the group stage and their spectacular progress. Postings positioning Qatar as a good host and the World Cup as a successful event. As the World Cup was impressive from a sporting perspective, many of the initially prominent talking points of a “World Cup of shame” were criticized as part of a cultural imperialist agenda and thus reframed. Again, themes and argumentations perpetuated in mainstream TV broadcasts find counter-narratives by certain fan groups online.

World politics and sports politics often coincided in the comments on the global football mega-event on Twitter, which is why they form one category in our case. In this topic area, the low amount of friction was striking. Almost universally, hate comments were directed against FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who was ac-

cused of corruption and greed for power. As the personification of existing commercialization tendencies in modern football, he offered a particularly broad target for hate comments. Whereas in the other posting categories, we could differentiate between politically left-wing and right-wing leaning attitudes, this was not the case in the context of criticism of commercialization and “FIFA hate”. In this sense, hate comments, if they were directed against FIFA, led to a sort of *communitization through criticism*. This formulation addresses one of our initial considerations of the study presented here. Based on the preliminary coverage of the World Cup, a united critical stance on the part of the public could have been expected. Instead, the comments of the World Cup audience revealed a divided spectrum of opinion. That is, except for Gianni Infantino.

Such great sport. Can't it be organized in the future without corrupt misanthropes?  
#FIFAWorldCup

Qatar not only bought the World Cup but also the results. #QatarWorldCup2022

While FIFA and the event host Qatar were generally criticized in the run-up to the event, the negative discourse during the World Cup mainly focused on FIFA President Gianni Infantino, who was continuously visible in closeups of TV broadcasts. As he often appeared in VIP boxes with international state representatives, representatives of regional ruling families or transnational company CEOs such as Elon Musk, hate comments focused on his specific person. The criticism of corruption against FIFA personified in Infantino reached a climax during the World Cup final: Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Infantino presented Lionel Messi, the captain of the winning team, with a Qatari bisht (traditional clothing) at the highlight of the award ceremony and posed with Messi in the spotlight for a long time. This gesture was dubbed “funny and pathetic at the same time” by fans.

Infantino and the Emir made sure to remind us one last time, just before the end, that there is more clinging to this World Cup trophy than just the kisses of the Argentinians.  
#FIFAWorldCup [translated]

How Infantino and the Emir suck up to Messi is funny and pathetic at the same time!  
#FIFAWorldCup

In regards to the sportive showing itself, fans posted countless amateur “play-by-play” comments on current events on the pitch. Further, refereeing decisions were met with enthusiasm or indignation. Trumping all other narratives and themes, there postings about Lionel Messi's position as the “GOAT” (“Greatest of all

time”) in the sport of soccer were predominant. This picks up on a cross-World Cup discussion thread that has accompanied the soccer world for decades: Which player, added up over league and national team games, leaves behind the indisputably “best” career in soccer—Christiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi?

Whether you like Messi or not - this constant dick measuring is completely stupid. Both Messi and Ronaldo are/were exceptional in their own way. Come on, this isn't normal. Just be glad you got to see them both play. #ARGFRA [translated]

Since Argentina won the World Cup with Messi as team captain, this discussion was ended for many fans. It is worth noting that the personality cult surrounding Messi not only overshadows the success of the Argentinian team, but indeed even the visibility of the World Cup itself. Messi's individual success and his “legacy” became a guarantee for attention, especially in the final matches of the World Cup. To a certain extent, the overarching history of Messi's career and his visibility as an international superstar also made it possible for those viewers who had not previously watched any World Cup matches or boycotted the event to follow the final in suspense.

Finally, we also recorded meta-postings about the broadcast and recipient situation at home. In them, users describe their own reception and address anomalies that they would like to share with other viewers.

Do you remember all those crazy digital animations they did for the line-ups from all possible perspectives? Now ZDF [German TV channel] is back with a flipchart. #zdf-sportstudio [translated]

Do you also hear the hissing with Mrs. Wellmer or is that just my Sonos? #ARGFRA [translated]

As in this example, audience members may notice a change in content, programming or aesthetics in their viewing experience and describe it. By making their own reception transparent in this way, users create a sense of community in the audience—or at least project a feeling of community for the person posting. It is above all casual comments like these that establish a sense of ‘normality’ in co-oriented audiences' viewing situations, as they are conversational comments that are usually made in co-present reception settings, such as watching a game together in a pub or at home on a couch. As these options were rare due to the lack of public viewings, pub evenings or watch parties during the ‘Winter World Cup’, we see meta-postings as a genuine or performative attempt to capture familiar audience situations in mediatized media reception.

## 6.2 Discussion

As an interim summary of our qualitative review of our research material presented here, it can be stated that the discourse on Twitter on the World Cup was multi-layered. Many topics emerged in a broad spectrum on which users could position themselves. This spectrum included positions that were opposed or antithetical to mainstream TV programming. Here, the difference to a classic broadcaster program is apparent: Where it would traditionally be the task of established media organizations to classify a spectrum of positions for an audience in order to prepare and disseminate a common sense assumption, the audience is left to its own devices while Second Screening. The sheer diversity of positions and the absence of a “common” attitude to what is happening on the first screen is reflected in the co-oriented audience.<sup>4</sup>

Fragmented online socialities participate in the generalized hashtags of the World Cup under one roof. However, this in no way means that Twitter postings in question were typed within the framework of a kind of deliberative and public sphere. Twitter suggests that “one post can spark several conversation threads, each of which can grow in length and complexity as more people chime in” (X 2025) This possibility was repeatedly described by Elon Musk as “the de facto public town square” (Musk, 2022). Conversation threads in the style of interpersonal negotiations in public spheres, however, hardly occur in this form in the case of the co-oriented sports audience of the 2022 World Cup. An initial review of the posts revealed that individual Twitter users posted less than twice on average during matches involving Germany (#GERJPN: 1.52; #GERESP: 1.69; #CRGGER: 1.93). The majority of comments were not involved in longer interpersonal “reply chains” (Gumbert et al., 2023) or conversation threads with other users, but at best positioned themselves with their own tweets or subtweets. As such, there was no perceptible discursive sphere in which the sum of countless interpersonal discussions, contributed would have led to a collective negotiation of a “common sense” on World Cup reception. One conclusion we draw from this is that postings were used for positioning, which were either directed at readers (and lurkers) of the World Cup hashtags, the trending timeline or their own followers, but not for interpersonal communication or the discursive negotiation of topics.

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<sup>4</sup>The heterogeneity of the posts can additionally be attributed to the fact that hashtags such as #GERJAP collect all tweets about a soccer match independently of existing community networks and thus counteract supposed “Twitter bubbles” or “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2012; Chitra & Musco, 2020).

If Twitter users were aware of a larger, media-mediated audience when watching the World Cup through their online communication but were not in direct discursive contact with other users, the question arises as to how the perception of other viewers influenced their viewing or posting behaviour. It also raises the question of when users who only post once during an entire game decide to do so. Like the Noelle-Neumannian model of the ‘spiral of silence’, does a users’ pseudo-statistical knowledge of a larger visible online audience affect when and how they raise their own voice? Even if users do not negotiate their positions discursively, the extent to which the visibility of the audience influences the communicative behaviour of users remains open. Based on the content and emotional orientation of the tweets over the course of a match, it would be possible to ascertain the extent to which the audience aligns itself with each other—outside of actual interpersonal discourse but more so on a subdued, emotional level. We are investigating these follow-up questions in further project steps with the help of NLP (Natural Language Processing) and emotional classifiers.

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## 7 Conclusion

With the World Cup in Qatar, the challenges and problems of modern football are once again intensifying (see Zeyringer, 2021). The progressive commercialization of soccer and its instrumentalization by politics should be seen in the context of the medialization of soccer (Meyen, 2014, p. 391). The calls for boycotts by fans and, in some cases, individual companies, as well as the thematization of grievances by parts of sports journalism itself, are indications of the increase in medialization (Nieland, 2023a) and reveal the problems of sports journalism (cf. Nieland, 2023b) and (international) sports politics (cf. Blaschke, 2020; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

Existing research on the importance of Twitter for sports fans (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Bowman & Crammer, 2014; Bixler & Friemel, 2017) was confirmed. Soccer fans used the platform for news, discussions and, especially in the run-up to the “Winter World Cup”, to articulate their discontent through calls for protests and boycotts (Hill et al., 2016; Nieland, 2017; Hölzen & Meier, 2018; Meier et al., 2021). As the event began, users followed and commented on the events in real time using media multitasking and Second Screening (Göttlich et al., 2017a). For many fans who boycotted the broadcasts, the Second Screen became the primary medium (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2019), as they were able to follow the discourse surrounding the matches without compromising their moral position. This led to a confrontation between spectators and non-spectators who, while sharing a passion for soccer and their national teams, denied each other’s authenticity as fans.

Our analysis shows a co-orientation among parts of the audience of the World Cup in Qatar. Online comments were written parallel to the broadcast and were predominantly critical. While viewers commented on and retweeted the match, users who supported the boycott perceived the course of the match through the surrounding discourse.

As co-oriented fans and while engaging in mediatized media reception, fans establish for themselves a virtual iteration of an opinionated stadium curve or pub conversation while being physically isolated or bound by moral obligations not to watch. The communicative practices and motivations of fan and audience exchange did not—contrarily to what we initially expected—play out on the model of a “communitization through criticism”. Instead of a unified online protest movement against the participation of sports organizations in the politically and morally questionable World Cup, fan groups have become even more fragmented. Twitter’s logic of organizing communicative topics under hashtags and highlighting popular tweets exacerbated this problem. Popular, critical and controversial messages served as anchors for thematic discussions, whereby communication was already embedded in several levels of meaning and opinion. In this environment, longer threads of discussion about fan authenticity or sporting events was hardly feasible. Many users tended to either comment on hashtags and tweets they already agreed with or defend their authenticity in short, unexpanded statements.

Ultimately, the co-oriented reception and discussion of the World Cup on Twitter succeeded in making the fragmentation and division of a seemingly global soccer fan community mutually visible, but it failed in bringing together already oppositional attitudes and sub-communities through a newfound common consciousness. Diverse forms of reception have emerged during the pandemic, and the motivations and opinions of co-oriented sports fans continue to fragment—a development that can generally be observed in the social media landscape. In this respect, it was possible to provide evidence that not only sport is a central instance of self- and social development, but also that fans are positioning themselves against sportswashing in general and FIFA in particular. The sportswashing efforts of Qatar and the hypercommercialization driven by FIFA proved only partially effective in the case of the World Cup, not least due to criticism voiced on social media. In the contested media mega-event of the FIFA World Cup (Nieland, 2023a; Horne, 2017; Ihle et al., 2017), the Second Screen functions as a central instance for identification, community-building, and increasingly as a space for resistant expressions.

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## **Part III**

# **Reflections from the Perspective of Sports Communication and Sports Policy**



# Sporting the Image: The Role of Sport Mega-Events in Saudi Arabia's Nation Branding Elements

# 15

Mohammed Alghamdi  and Franzisca Weder

## 1 Introduction

The image of a country or a nation does not only drive the reputation in certain industries like tourism. Much more, the image defines, drives, or potentially hinders political relations in an international level and determines global perceptions. According to Anholt (2007) each nation possesses a distinct image or brand that represents it to the entire globe. Middle Eastern countries have spent many decades contending with the perennially negative stereotype of anti-Western, extremist decay (Kheraiji, 2011). Over years, western media representations have reinforced the perception of the 'Arab Muslim' as an enemy, more or less radical, with little variation or change (Alsharafat, 2019). Key components of this negative perception have been religious fanaticism and acts of terrorism and gender aspects, particularly the depiction of Arab women (across a range of media) as uniquely oppressed and unable to obtain their rights and here mainly in relation to Saudi Arabia (Kheraiji,

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2011). These media representations have in turn influenced and defined Western public opinion on Middle Eastern countries and related issues (Khouli, 2018).

Recently, massive structural changes in Saudi Arabia ushered in a new leadership and a new political direction with the pronouncement of 'Vision 2030' announced in early 2016. As part of this, the government sought to challenge and address the negative perceptions of Saudi Arabia internationally; one of the first steps was, the establishment of the General Entertainment Authority and Ministry of Sport and focusing on so called 'sport mega-events' and related communication strategies, which haven't happened in Saudi Arabia before (Rappeport, 2019). While the reformative impetus behind these actions is well known, the role of sport mega-events in shaping KSA image and their influence on different elements of the country's nation branding need to be studied, evaluated, and reflected on from a professional and academic perspective.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of sport mega-events held in KSA on the nation branding elements, with a specific focus on understanding how these events contribute to shaping and enhancing a nation's image, reputation, and perception on a global scale. Through a meticulous analysis of the outcomes and observations associated with hosting such events, this study provides significant insight regarding the manner in which sport mega-events shape and boost the nation branding efforts of Saudi Arabia.

We will study sport mega-events as a form of communication to explore the role of this strategy in relation to components of nation branding (i.e., tourism, policy, people, investment, brands, and culture), and to analyse how these events affect KSA's current image.

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## 2 Country Image and Nation Branding

Several disciplines have maintained a steadfast interest in the concept of country image including communication research (e.g. Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Lee et al., 2012; Tabak & Avraham, 2018; Wanta et al., 2004), marketing research (e.g. Chattalas et al., 2008; Speece & Phung Nguyen, 2005), place and event management research (e.g. Dubinsky & Dzikus, 2019; Gripsrud et al., 2010), business research (e.g. Magnusson et al., 2019; Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Zeugner-Roth & Zabkar, 2015), and political science research (e.g. Nye, 2004; Schatz & Levine, 2010; Vickers, 2004). As a result, the concept of image can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the field of study.

From a place image perspective, image is understood to be a multi-faceted concept that combines the various ways in which people evaluate a place (Baloglu &

Brinberg, 1997). Country image is commonly defined as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993, p. 193). The concept of “image” encompasses the full range of communication-related activities and their outcomes for targeted audiences (Grunic, 1993, p. 126). Image, in this context, may be viewed as perceptions of actions made when engaging with a nation, such as visiting the country, being exposed to media information about the country, and knowing individuals from the country.

To develop a connection between the country image and the nation branding concept, Fan (2010) proposes a definition of nation branding from the perspective of image management. According to Fan, nation branding is “a process by which a nation’s images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience” (p. 101). Nation branding, according to this definition, is a deliberate, long-term process involving consistent efforts to shape and manage the image of a country over time. Hence, the country’s image is shaped as an outcome of the practice of nation branding (Dubinsky, 2023). This practice comprises six components: the promotion of tourism; the export brands; the policy decisions of the nation’s government; the investments; the cultural activities; and the people of the nation themselves (Anholt, 2007, p. 25).

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### 3 Theoretical Background

One of the most essential concepts for nations in the contemporary age, Competitive Identity is a theory that contributes to a more complete comprehension and evaluation of a country’s reputation in the international community (Blair et al., 2014). According to Anholt (2007, p. 25), the reputation of a nation is made up of six elements: tourism; brands; policy; investments; culture; and people. The phrase “Competitive Identity” is used to characterize the integration of brand management and public diplomacy, as well as trade, investment, tourism, and export promotion (Anholt, 2007, p. 3). In his book, Anholt (2007, p. 26) contends that the core principle of Competitive Identity is that effective national identities are built and sustained when governments have a strong, consistent, and optimistic vision for their country, and when governments successfully coordinate the actions, investments, policies, and communications of all six points of the hexagon to prove and reinforce this vision.

According to Anholt (2007), the first element, “tourism,” is considered to be having the loudest voice in the process of branding the nation. This is due to the

fact that tourist boards often have the largest budgets and the most experienced marketers. As the second facet of the competitive identity hexagon, export brands are influential promoters of national branding internationally, but only when their country of origin is well communicated. If consumers are unaware of a product's country of origin, then they will not be influenced by it. Policy, representing governmental actions, is the third facet of the competitive identity hexagon. This includes both foreign policy, which can have direct effects on foreign people, and internal policy, which can be reported on in worldwide media.

Moreover, the fourth aspect of the competitive identity is the investment that is used by the country as a tool to solicit inbound investment, draw foreign talent and students, and encourage foreign corporations to expand their operations inside the country. Culture, the fifth element, illustrates the ways in which cultural interchange and cultural activity contribute to a country's standing, for better or worse. Hosting a mega-event like the World Cup or a visit by a famous sports club like Real Madrid are both examples of cultural activity. Finally, how the country's leaders, celebrities in the media and sports, and everyday citizens act while they're travelling overseas, as well as how they treat foreigners once they arrive, constitute the last component.

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## 4 Sport Mega-Events

Anholt (2007) states that communication strategies are crucial for the success of promoting the six elements of nation branding (p. 31). These strategies play a vital role in shaping international public opinion, which is influenced by how the public perceives a country's image in relation to other nations (Buhmann, 2016). Changes in public opinion are likewise influenced by the information received through media channels (Botan, 1992). Sport mega-events may serve as a means of communication, offering the chance to establish or enhance a nation's image and engage in re-branding efforts (Florek & Insch, 2011). Sport mega-events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, are progressively acknowledged as potent tools for bolstering a nation's image and presenting extraordinary branding prospects (Higham & Hinch, 2009).

A large-scale event is an opportunity for the host country to improve its image among international audiences abroad (Müller & Steyaert, 2013): a major part of the reason why the competition to host international mega-events is so fierce (Hall, 1992). Most mega-events thus far have been held in developed countries and positively contributed to the ongoing formation of a progressive image and strong identity abroad (Perić et al., 2019). Yet country image is more likely to be affected by

major sports events held in developing countries (Gripsrud et al., 2010) and also for small countries like Qatar (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). (Grix & Brannagan, 2016) hypothesize that sports mega-events such as the Qatar World Cup 2022, if managed adeptly, will prove highly effective as part of a communications strategy re-introducing Qatar to the world.

The findings of some studies suggest that sport mega-events can change country image only for the better, and that negative fallout is almost unheard of (Auruskeviciene et al., 2010). Sports events such as the World Cup and Olympic Games are a potent source of positive country image enhancement globally (Perić et al., 2019). The image of South Korea was significantly enhanced after the World Cup in 2002, which resulted in a huge uplift in tourism (Kim & Morrision, 2005). The effective image of Azerbaijan was significantly improved after hosting the Eurovision Song Contest in 2019 (Herz et al., 2018). Yet, other studies have shown that animosity levels towards Italy increased significantly after the Winter Olympics of 2006, which meant a negative impression had been given and country image diminished (Auruskeviciene et al., 2010). Viewers who were exposed heavily to media coverage of the event came away with negative impressions (Gripsrud et al., 2010). (Herz et al., 2018) also found that the improvements to country image following a mega-event are unstable and can be of limited duration.

There is general consensus that country reputation has a direct impact on people's decision of whether to visit a country or not (Yang & Wang, 2018). Safety, good quality of life and the existence of tourist attractions are some elements that may help a country to positively define its identity, and sway people to visit a particular place (Cofirlea, 2015). Reporting of personal experiences from visiting a foreign country is also pivotal in construction of country image and reputation. However, above all, media coverage remains the pivotal influencer, and the strongest image shapers of any major event are media outlets such as radio, TV, newspapers, magazines and social media platforms (Kunczik, 1997). According to AGB Nielsen, 4.4 billion viewers watched the Olympic Games that were held in Beijing in 2008 (Hui & Wang, 2008). Such a huge number of viewers is one example of how media coverage is at the heart of positive or negative exposure and the shaping of country image around mega-events.

Hosting sporting events may have a significant impact on a nation's branding across six key elements: culture, tourism, investment, people, policy, and brands. Countries gain global visibility by organizing and participating in sporting events, which not only showcase their competitive prowess but also highlight their cultural and societal values (Dubinsky, 2019). Pappas (2014) emphasized the significance aspect of citizens' involvement in mega-events, asserting that the success of such events relies heavily on the support of the host community (p. 10). Countries

perceive sports as a valuable instrument for showcasing their soft power, as stated by Nye (2004). Winning the rights to host a mega-event is viewed as a chance for the country to construct and enhance its infrastructure to cater to visitors and promote long-term national development (Smith, 2012). Mega sporting events have a significant influence on tourism, as evidenced by studies conducted by McCartney (2005) and Getz and Page (2016). Additionally, research by Fourie and Santana-Gallego (2011) indicates that these events often result in an average increase in tourism of 8.1%. Hosting sporting events also has a tangible economic effect (Gibson et al., 2014; Kasimati & Dawson, 2009; Mitchell & Stewart, 2015).

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## 5 Method

The literature and studies that lead to the development of research questions have been explored in the preceding sections. The following phase, after establishing the theoretical foundation for the study of nation branding and strategic communication in the context of sport mega-events, is to develop a suitable methodology to address the research questions and meet the study's purpose. Specifically, this study aims to study sport mega-events as a form of communication to explore the role of this strategy in relation to components of nation branding (i.e., tourism, policy, people, investment, brands, and culture), and to analyze how these events affect KSA's current image.

### 5.1 Data Collection

Given the qualitative nature of this study, interviews are employed to collect data that addresses the research questions (667) (Roulston & Halpin, 2022), and to prompted participants to express an opinion on their own perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, emotions (Aaker et al., 2001), and interpretations of their experiences (667) (Roulston & Halpin, 2022). Thus, this study employs the semi-structured interview, which is a form of exploratory interview usually applied to qualitative research in the social sciences (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, p. 4825). The semi-structured interview is initiated with a protocol of open-ended questions (Knox & Burkard, 2014) and is often followed by why or how questions (Adams, 2015, p. 493). As is typical for research of exploratory approach, the inclusion of open-ended questions strengthened and raised the validity of the interviewees' replies (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Therefore, a series of semi-structured expert interviews with twenty-two communication experts and officials at several Saudi

Arabian government entities (to provide information on existing communication strategies and objectives) was utilized to explore current communication strategies and evaluate their 'integrative' and 'holistic' character and impact. In order to assure the reliability of the information, each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009).

Purposive sampling method is employed to choose respondents who are most likely to share interesting and relevant data (Kelly, 2010, p. 317), and due to the fact that diverse types of participants may hold relevant and divergent perspectives on the concepts and issues at hand, and hence must be included in the sample (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014). Maximum variation sampling, which is a strategy of the purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990, p. 169) is implemented, since the country image is a multidisciplinary term (i.e., public relations, nation branding, and public diplomacy) that is dependent on several factors (i.e., culture, investment, tourism, and policies). The objective of maximum variation sampling is to guarantee that a wide variety of data variations in a particular case are explored (Higginbottom, 2004, p. 16), and significant cross-variational common patterns are identified (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Hence, the sample of communication experts chosen for the interviews included experts from a political, economic, cultural, and tourism background. The compilation of the sample also included government communication experts, and non-government communication experts. In KSA, there is a total of 7 ministries, including Ministry of Sports, Ministry of Media, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Foreign, Ministry of Investment, Ministry of Culture, and GEA, whose mission includes promoting a positive image of KSA. This research also includes professionals in the field of non-governmental communication from five distinct backgrounds: academics, local sport journalists, international sport journalists, public relations firms, and travel agencies.

## 5.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis method employed in this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching over a data collection to detect, examine, and report recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As this research explores a set of experiences, thematic analysis is an appropriate and useful method to utilise, especially when seeking to interpret a set of experiences, concepts, or behaviours across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An effective framework for thematic analysis is provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) in the

form of a six-step guide (i.e., familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report). Moreover, researchers utilised NVivo to create a visual index of the dominant themes that surfaced during the interviews; this will aid in reading the whole text to observe the correlations between categories and codes (Welsh, 2002). As a result, data can be stored and retrieved more effectively (Esterberg, 2001); usability can be improved; accuracy can be increased; and transparency can be enhanced (Gibbs, 2002).

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## 6 Results and Discussion

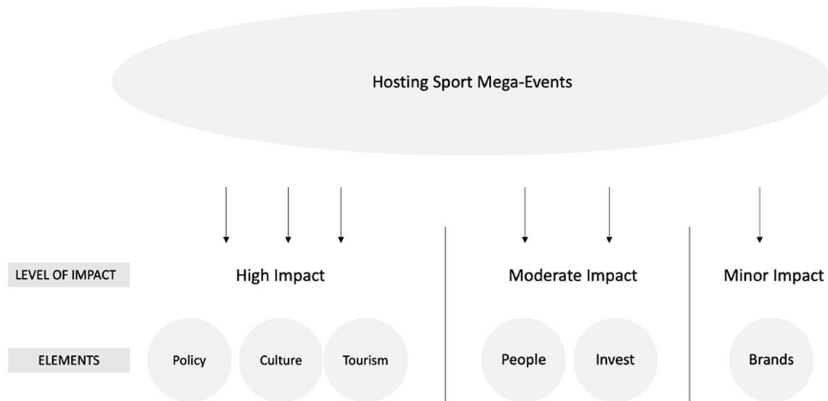
This study contributed an additional dimension to Anholt's Competitive Identity framework, namely sport, on the basis of the data provided. Anholt (2007) identifies tourism, culture, investment, policy, people, and brands as the six pillars of nation branding. Anholt (2007) of the book "Competitive Identity" incorporated the hosting of sporting mega-events within its culture components. However, our findings indicate that sporting events serve as a means of communication that plays a vital part in promoting the nation's brand, but sport as a concept is a distinct element.

Another important finding is that sport is the most prominent factor influencing nation branding in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, contrary to the Anholt Competitive Identity framework's conclusion that tourism is the most prominent. This could potentially be attributed to the abundance of sporting events that have been held in Saudi Arabia in recent years.

An evident conclusion that arises from the analysis of sport mega-events as a means of communication to investigate the impact of this approach on nation branding elements (tourism, policy, people, investment, brands, and culture) is that hosting sporting mega-events influences culture, tourism, and policy in a significant, immediate, and effective manner. Despite this, its impact on investments and people is relatively moderate, while its influence on brands is negligible (Fig. 15.1).

### 6.1 Sport Dimension

During our data analysis, we observed that communication experts in KSA are regarding sport as a separate component and making comparisons with culture, tourism, and other aspects of nation branding. Therefore, we propose incorporating sport as an additional dimension to the Competitive Identity theory. The findings



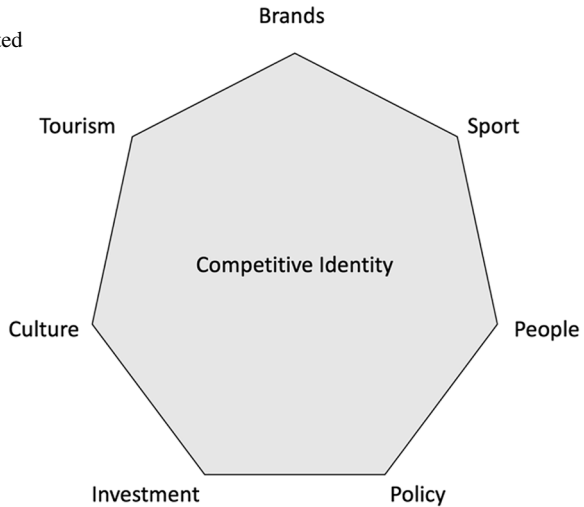
**Fig. 15.1** Level of sport mega-events impact on nation branding elements

served as the impetus to initiate an investigation into the reconceptualization of the sport as an additional dimension of nation branding (Fig. 15.2).

The notion of Competitive Identity encompasses three characteristics: the ability to attract various components such as consumers, tourists, talent, investors, respect, and attention; the capacity to transfer influence to linked elements; and the provision of a sense of organization (Anholt, 2007, p. 29). These characteristics are associated with the concept of sport. More precisely, sport serves as a valuable instrument for countries to enhance their appeal to both domestic and international audiences (Dubinsky, 2019), attract a greater number of foreign tourists (Cornelissen et al., 2011), bring in foreign sports professionals (Connell, 2018), entice foreign investment (Müller et al., 2016), and increase their worldwide visibility (Cornelissen, 2007).

Furthermore, Anholt (2007, p. 16) stated that fostering a sense of “benign nationalism” among the public is the primary and most crucial element of any national Competitive Identity strategy. The notion of “benign nationalism” revolves around local populace members “living the brand,” given that they are a nation’s principal and most efficient means of communication. In this context, sport has a significant role in fostering a feeling of national unity and identity among the citizens of a nation (Jaksa, 2011; Li & Feng, 2021). Most importantly, sport has evolved beyond being a mere game (Smith, 2023; Niciporuc, 2010; Richelieu, 2018); each country has to consider its sports as a comprehensive concept (Rein & Shields, 2007). In support of this argument, sport and tourism, in addition to

**Fig. 15.2** Heptagon of Competitive Identity. Adapted and extended from Anholt (2007) to include the Sport dimension.



technology, science, and agriculture, are utilised by Saudi Arabia to distinguish itself internationally and build its brand (Avraham, 2020).

## 6.2 Sport Mega-events Impact on Nation Branding

This study demonstrates that hosting sports events plays an important role in promoting the nation's brand in multiple ways. Sports events can serve as an initial platform and motivation for promoting a country, while also being utilized to consistently highlight its culture, natural resources, and tourism attractions (Ratković & Dašić, 2018, as cited in Dasić & Jović Bogdanović, 2021). Subsequent data will provide comprehensive analyses of all elements of nation branding.

### 6.2.1 Tourism

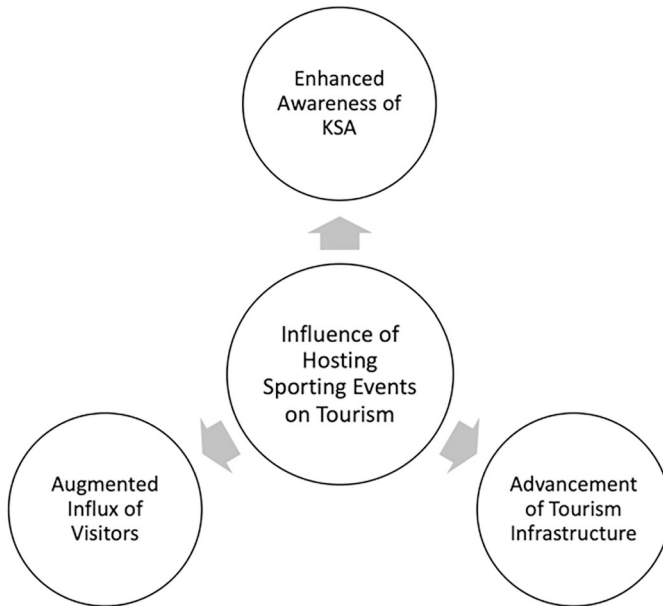
Mega-events are occasions that draw a significant number of visitors for a predetermined period of time (Müller, 2015). This is consistent with our data, which indicates that one of the ultimate objectives of hosting sporting events is to positively impact the perception of Saudi Arabia among tourists. A communication expert in a government entity stated that:

The hosting of sporting events exerts a substantial influence on the tourism industry, establishing a mutually advantageous partnership between the two sectors. Formula

1, WWE, and football tournaments have attracted a large number of spectators from various parts of the globe, resulting in a significant increase in tourism in KSA. The Ministry of Tourism's figures reveal a substantial 146% surge in tourist numbers in 2023 compared to 2022, indicating a huge increase in the intention to visit KSA. The observed rise can be attributed to various variables, with one prominent factor being the hosting of sporting events.

A positive assessment is given by the managing director of a public relations agency in Saudi Arabia, focusing on communication and media. The director believed that "Saudi Arabia has already hosted more than 80 international sporting events, attracting a total of over 2.5 million visitors. Therefore, hosting a sporting event presents a valuable chance for us to enhance the visibility of Saudi Arabia on a global scale. The global audience has been exposed to these events through extensive media coverage, which has effectively highlighted the various attractions, hospitality, and tourism offers of the area. This particular exposure has had a substantial impact on the reputation of Saudi Arabia, resulting in a notable surge in tourism interest and visitation that extends beyond the duration of the event" (Fig. 15.3).

The majority of respondents emphasised that hosting sporting events has the greatest impact on tourism, among the elements of nation branding. The findings indicated that the influence of hosting sporting events on tourism is attributed to three key factors: the enhanced awareness of KSA, the augmented influx of visitors, and the advancement of tourism infrastructure. According to 11 interviewees, the host of sporting events captures the interest of the media, viewers, and spectators, resulting in widespread coverage and visibility. 7 respondents confirmed the substantial advancement of tourism infrastructure due to the hosting of sporting events, as they necessitate high-quality amenities such as accommodation, restaurants, coffee shops, and stadiums. In order to substantiate this claim, a sport journalist cited Saudi Arabia's Qiddiya Stadium, which will be the first of its kind in the world, with a fully integrated facility that includes a retractable roof, pitch, and a large LED wall. Another interviewee, a communication expert in a government agency, provided an additional example: "Qiddiya City Esports Arena is the inaugural esports zone showcasing four large arenas, one of which boasts a 5,300-seat arena, positioning it as one of the world's top three largest esports venues." All of these factors contribute to "the enhancement of the destination's image as an attractive choice for tourists" as indicated by one of the interviewees, a scholar in the field of communication.

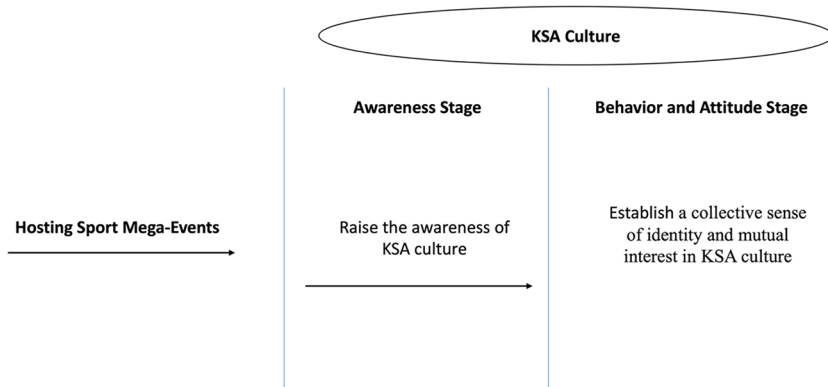


**Fig. 15.3** Influence of sport mega-events on tourism

### 6.2.2 Culture

Culture-related activities frequently occur in conjunction with the sporting mega-event (Byers et al., 2012). The sporting mega-events, according to a communication consultant for the Ministry of Culture in Saudi Arabia, provide the country with an opportunity to showcase its cultures on an international level. The interviewee elaborated that “sporting mega-events facilitate the convergence of individuals from diverse backgrounds, thereby encouraging dialogue, establishing relationships, and providing opportunities to experience various cultures.” The consultant further stated that, the ultimate outcome of the sporting events with respect to culture is “the establishment of cultural familiarity, which subsequently fosters a favorable attitude towards KSA.”

The themes of several sporting events hosted by KSA serve as a reflection of the cultural identity of the country. As an example, the opening ceremony of Formula 1 showcased the cultural emblem of Saudi Arabia, consisting of a palm tree and two crossed swords. This emblem was accompanied by various other cultural symbols, including the national anthem, falcon, and Arabian horse, which were exhibited in a visually stunning spectacle (Fig. 15.4).



**Fig. 15.4** Influence of sport mega-events on KSA culture

Significant data was provided by one of the interviewees, who stated that a Formula 1 event in Saudi Arabia was attended by more than 170 media representatives from 129 agencies across 28 different countries. Awareness of the tangible and intangible cultural elements of KSA would be increased by the viewers of these numerous media platforms, according to a communication expert affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. Conversely, an additional interviewee contended that KSA has progressed from the stage of merely raising awareness of its culture to the stage of influencing the behaviour and attitudes of foreign audiences through the establishment of a collective sense of identity and mutual interest in KSA culture. In support of this assertion, the interviewee noted that culturally specific trips to Saudi Arabia witnessed an increase in incoming visitors, which peaked at four million in 2022, following a low of 480,000 trips in 2021. The interviewee stated that:

Hosting international sporting mega-events has put Saudi Arabia in a position to influence both the attitude (a favourable impression of the country's culture) and the behaviour (a visit to the country) of audiences in other nations.

### 6.2.3 Policy

Sports are widely regarded as a valuable instrument through which nations and governments can exhibit their soft power (Nye, 2004). According to an interviewee, the ambassador at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, the practice of hosting sport mega-events is considered "an integral component of diplomatic efforts." The ambassador also stated that "KSA has generated interest and gained

attention from the international globe through the hosting of large-scale sporting events.” The interviewee further asserted that “this exposure is vital to the enhancement of our soft power, thereby expanding its global influence and appeal.” The ambassador concluded that “hosting sporting events enables KSA to reshape perceptions and demonstrate notable progress in social reforms, particularly in areas such as women’s empowerment and gender equality.”

Interviewees often noted that KSA’s proficiency in organising international sporting events positions the country as a capable host nation. An interviewee articulated the aim of being capable host as “a capable host country is perceived as a progressive country by other nations.” Certain communication experts provided further explanation that “the KSA’s host of sporting events attracts players, authorities, and spectators from various nations who congregate to engage in dialogue and acquire knowledge regarding the cultures, traditions, and values of KSA. This leads to cultivate shared understanding and promote positive stereotypes of KSA, and eventually strengthen diplomatic ties.”

#### **6.2.4 Investment**

Bassem bin Khalil Ibrahim, Director of Sports Sector Investment Development at the Ministry of Investment, disclosed to Argaam that the sports market in the Kingdom experienced a substantial expansion in 2023, reaching SAR 27 billion, up from SAR 24 billion in 2022 (“Saudi sports market” 2023). This is consistent with what interviewees have stated repeatedly: that KSA is “diversifying the economy” by investing in the sports sector. A communication scholar offered an academic perspective that KSA utilizes the sport mega-events approach “to guarantee widespread media coverage, thereby grabbing the attention of international audiences.” The aforementioned exposure has the potential to “bolster the reputation and image of KSA, making it more appealing to international investors who may perceive prospects for corporate growth or investment within KSA.”

The hosting of prominent events such as WWE, World Boxing Super Series, Spanish Super Cup, Italian Super Cup, Formula 1, Dakar Rally, and Saudi Arabia Tennis Championships in KSA has resulted in significant investments in infrastructure. These investments encompass the construction and enhancement of race tracks, as well as the development of supporting facilities and transportation infrastructure. These sporting events have garnered the participation of highly skilled players and garnered significant international media coverage, thereby bolstering the nation’s reputation as a prominent sports hub. Saudi Arabia utilises media exposure around the sport mega-events as a means to effectively convey its investment prospects, economic developments, and business environment. KSA has implemented multiple investment campaigns with the objective of enhancing the

country's reputation as a highly desirable investment location. The hosting of sporting events, due to its significant media exposure, serves to enhance the effectiveness of campaigns and expand the reach to a broader variety of targeted audiences. An instance of a campaign that has been employed in nearly all sporting events is the "Invest Saudi" campaign.

### **6.2.5 People**

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, initiated Vision 2030 with the objective of elevating Saudi Arabia to a position of global leadership. These transformations and reforms have made him a role model in various nations as he has opened up the country, combated corruption, diversified the economy, and empowered women. Hosting sporting events has afforded an opportunity to present these achievements of MBS to a broader audience, as sporting events possess significant worldwide visibility. In addition, the decision to host sporting events rests with the country's leaders, who must also ensure the adoption of modern technological capabilities and the development of infrastructure. This presents the MBS as a visionary who is spearheading the process of modernization and advancement.

According to Anholt (2007, p. 25), the way citizens behave towards visitors in their countries plays a role in shaping the reputation of that country. Our data, collected from communication experts, indicates that there are numerous vlogs created by visitors who have experienced exceptional treatment from KSA citizens. These visitors have been met with warm and generous hospitality, as well as respectful behaviour. Hosting sporting events attracts a greater number of visitors, who establish connections with KSA citizens; consequently, this influences the country's image and reputation. An additional significant finding from the data is that sport event hosting contributes to the formation of Saudi superstars or models who may become famous in the future. One instance of this is the participation of the professional Saudi wrestler Mansoor in the WWE event held in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the boxing global event known as "The Truth" in Riyadh featured the participation of four Saudi boxers. Having renowned individuals as citizens will contribute to the establishment of a favorable perception of KSA.

### **6.2.6 Brands**

Export brands function as "powerful ambassadors" of a country's reputation on an international level, according to Anholt (2007, p. 25). Based on our data analysis, it appears that hosting sporting events does not have a discernible impact on Saudi brands. One aspect worthy of mention is that certain Saudi brands, including Riyadh Air, optimise their brand visibility throughout the sporting events in order to spark the interest of potential foreign audience. The hosting of sporting events in

KSA does not have any impact on its reputation as an oil country, as its reputation was already firmly established prior to hosting these events. Indeed, the nation is actively engaged in the process of diversifying its economy and diminishing its reliance on oil.

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## 7 Conclusion

The study introduces an additional element to the Competitive Identity framework, namely “sport”. This addition is necessary as sport is a distinct notion that needs to be differentiated from the other elements. It also signifies the influence of hosting sport mega-events on each element of a nation’s branding, including tourism, policy, people, investment, brands, and culture. It is critical to mention that the focus of this study was to investigate the impact of hosting sport mega-events on the profile of the KSA, as perceived by communication experts in KSA. Our objective was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the operations and execution of the communication department’s strategy through this particular form of communication.

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# The Qatar World Cup and the Politics of Protest: Migrant Workers, Boycott Strategies, and the One-Love Armband Debate in the German Arena of Sports Diplomacy

# 16

Jürgen Mittag

## 1 Introduction: The Politics of Sports—Mobilization, Projection, and Contestation Considering the Qatar World Cup 2022

With its high mobilization potential, sport serves as a projection surface for a wide range of interests. The considerable attention that sport generates has led a variety of actors—from politics to media, culture, and business—to attempt to appropriate it for their own purposes. Thus, sport is not an end in itself, but is used to achieve specific goals or to convey messages. The marketing of new products by the sports industry on the side-lines of a sporting event can serve as an example, just like the appearance of a politician in the VIP section at an international football match, aiming to promote themselves or campaign for a political cause. Highly publicized settings such as major sporting events are particularly well suited as platforms for sport-related political projection. Against this backdrop, the metaphor of the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup as a global stage has become increasingly widespread since the 2010s. This is all the more true because major sporting events still represent one of the few remaining points of connection for public communi-

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cation that continue to unite broad segments of society. Societies are increasingly fragmented, and lifestyles and leisure activities are becoming ever more differentiated. Nevertheless, sport—and especially football—continues to provide a viable and resonant foundation for communication.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar provides ample evidence that recent developments represent a new peak of sport-related political projection (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Kozhanov et al., 2025). The appearance of German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser at the German national team's opening match wearing the "One Love" armband—a symbol against all forms of discrimination—is one such example. Another is the black robe draped over Argentine team captain Lionel Messi by Qatar's head of state during the awards ceremony after the final. These two examples are merely the tip of an increasingly unmanageable pile of statements and actions that made the 2022 World Cup arguably the most politicized sporting event of all time (Al Thani, 2021). Both Arab state media where a one-sided Western perspective has been particularly criticized (Al Hroub, 2022) and Western academic research which has used the concept of Sports washing have already examined this politicization in greater detail (Busse & Wildangel, 2022; Boykoff, 2022; Gläsel et al., 2024).

The use of sport as a projection surface has been significantly driven not only by societal changes but also by transformations in the media landscape. Numerous texts in this volume provide evidence that social media, in particular—from which fewer and fewer people can withdraw—exert significant influence on opinion-forming processes mediated through sport. With this direct form of communication, everything becomes public. However, to what extent this kind of political appropriation of sport is considered legitimate by society remains unclear. What is emerging instead is that the interplay between sport and politics is increasingly becoming the subject of negotiation processes.

This chapter focuses on two central points of contention in Germany during the 2022 World Cup: the debate surrounding the situation of migrant workers in Qatar and the dispute over wearing the "One Love" armband. While the working and living conditions of construction workers—most of whom come from South and Southeast Asia—sparked international criticism of the tournament's human rights foundations, the controversy surrounding the "One Love" armband symbolized the restriction of freedom of speech and expression under FIFA rules and Qatari law, particularly as perceived in Germany. Both conflicts made it clear that the 2022 World Cup extended far beyond sports to become a global arena for human rights and political disputes—thereby exemplifying both the opportunities and limitations of modern sports diplomacy.

The following analysis considers the roles of sports self-governance through sports associations, the civil society dimension through non-sports-related societal organizations, and the state level through the federal government and Bundestag. The role of the business sector is also briefly touched upon. The aim is to demonstrate how diverse the protest was orchestrated, but also to highlight that protest was strongly driven by interests and only expressed in a limitedly unified manner. The empirical observations are contextualized within both the broader debate on sports boycotts and the increasingly significant research field of sports diplomacy.

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## **2 Strategic Shifts in International Sports Politics: From Sporting Boycotts and Diplomatic Abstentions to Symbolic Protest**

Among the most publicly visible instruments of sports politics are sporting boycotts and exclusions. The banning of individual actors or entire countries from sporting events usually stems either from political conflicts or from disputes inherent to the sports system itself. When political boycotts of the Olympic Games are discussed, the events in Montreal (1976), Moscow (1980), and Los Angeles (1984) typically come to the fore. However, it can be demonstrated that calls for boycotts and actual exclusions have occurred at almost every modern Olympic Games (Lebedeva, 2010; Beacom, 2012; Berg et al., 2012). In 1956, for instance, the National Olympic Committees of the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland boycotted the Melbourne Games in protest against the suppression of the Hungarian uprising. The withdrawal of Egypt, Iraq, Cambodia, and Lebanon was instead directed against Israel's invasion of the Sinai Peninsula during the Suez Crisis. Additionally, China boycotted the Melbourne Games because Beijing was unable to assert its claim of sole representation for all of China, including Taiwan.

The three Olympic Games of 1976, 1980, and 1984 represent the zenith of the boycott movement. In 1976, over 20 national teams withdrew from the Montreal Games shortly before their commencement to protest the International Olympic Committee's lack of consequences for the South African apartheid regime and for the New Zealand rugby team, which had played matches in South Africa prior to the Games. Already in October 1974, amid the détente of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had been awarded the 1980 Summer Olympics. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and following the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, the U.S. National Olympic Committee announced that it would boycott the Moscow Games. A total of 41 additional countries joined the boycott, including the Federal Republic of Germany; however, athletes from most Western European countries

still participated. On site, 16 nations expressed their protest by refraining from displaying their national flags during the opening ceremony, instead marching under the Olympic flag or that of their national Olympic committee. Seven nations sent only flag bearers but no athletes.

In response to the 1980 boycott, the Soviet Union and 18 other countries—including the GDR—declined to participate in the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The boycott of the 1988 Seoul Games by North Korea, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua marked the provisional end of boycott efforts by states and National Olympic Committees. Increasingly, it was recognized that athletes should not be made to suffer from boycotts due to political grievances in host countries, as major sporting events often represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and the pinnacle of an athletic career. As such, political interventions of such an extreme nature came to be seen as inappropriate.

Nevertheless, Olympic Games and major sporting events more broadly continue to serve as platforms for boycott actions, which are now increasingly carried out by individual athletes or politicians rather than by states. This was evident, for example, at the Olympic Games in Athens (2004), Beijing (2008), and Tokyo (2021), when athletes from the Arab world—especially judokas—refused to compete against Israeli athletes. A new variation of boycotts was tested during the EURO 2012 tournament, when the European Commission and later several heads of state and government from EU member states declared that they would not travel to Ukraine in protest against the authoritarian policies of then-President Viktor Yanukovich and the imprisonment of opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, while still attending the tournament co-hosted by Poland. This form of targeted non-attendance by state representatives has since become known as a “diplomatic boycott”. European governments in particular have repeatedly employed this method as a new form of protest.

For instance, the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and other Western nations did not send official delegations to the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. This gesture aimed to denounce Russia’s anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, restrictions on press freedom, repression of NGOs, and widespread environmental destruction in the Sochi region. One year later, Germany, the UK, and Norway refrained from sending government representatives to the 2015 European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan—a country heavily criticized for its political prisoners, restricted press freedom, and suppression of civil society organizations.

A significant diplomatic boycott occurred in the run-up to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. In December 2021, the United States announced it would not send any official representatives to the opening ceremony or other ceremonial

events of the Games. The U.S. government, under President Joe Biden, cited grave human rights violations in China, particularly concerning the Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. Other Western countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Lithuania, and later Denmark, followed suit. These governments emphasized that their athletes were, of course, free to compete—the boycott was not aimed at the sport itself but was instead intended as a political signal of disapproval.

Diplomatic boycotts are typically justified by appeals to human rights, the rule of law, or international norms. The deliberate absence of official delegations is intended to signal international condemnation of a host state's policies without jeopardizing athletes' participation. According to Cottrell and Nelson (2010), a diplomatic boycott constitutes "a foreign policy signal aimed at promoting universal values such as human rights, without resorting to formal sanctions." It rests on the principle of "naming and shaming", as described by Keck and Sikkink (1998) in their "boomerang theory," in which states leverage high-profile platforms to expose political norm violations and generate international pressure.

The effectiveness of diplomatic boycotts remains contested in academic literature. On one hand, they attract global attention to problematic conditions and provide a platform for value-based foreign policy—especially for democracies seeking to distance themselves from authoritarian host states. According to Grix and Lee (2013), such boycotts at least influence discursive power, as host nations are forced to justify themselves both politically and in the media. On the other hand, the concrete political impact on host countries is often limited. Authoritarian regimes can reframe boycotts as foreign interference or as expressions of "Western arrogance" for domestic audiences. Furthermore, incoherent application—for instance, when the U.S. boycotts an event while other EU states attend—can undermine their impact (Zimbalist, 2015).

Against this backdrop, symbolic protest within the realm of sport appears increasingly effective compared to outright boycotts, as it creates global visibility without vacating the platform entirely. Symbolic protest allows actors to remain part of the dialogue and exert pressure, without forfeiting influence through absence. In this way, the targets of criticism may ultimately be held more accountable on the international stage than would be possible through silent non-participation—despite the inherent limitations of symbolic gestures (Bertoli, 2017).

### 3 Pathways of Sports Diplomacy: Between Soft Power and Political Protest

Although sports diplomacy de facto dates back to antiquity, the term itself only gradually gained traction over the course of the twentieth century. Initially conceived as a primarily symbolic gesture of international courtesy, sports diplomacy has evolved into a strategic instrument of foreign policy. At its core, sports diplomacy refers to the use of sport as a means of advancing foreign policy objectives—be it in the realm of image cultivation, relationship-building, or the communication of political messages (Murray, 2012). In this capacity, sport functions not only as a stage for intergovernmental cooperation, but increasingly also as a platform for criticism, protest, or political distancing—manifesting, for instance, in the form of diplomatic boycotts as discussed previously.

Awareness of sport's potential to facilitate international cooperation and interstate exchange has expanded significantly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The concept of "sports diplomacy," which was already employed in the context of China's ping-pong diplomacy, has gained increasing prominence as a deliberately deployed instrument of *public diplomacy*, particularly through the pioneering efforts of the United States and Australia. Political decision-makers and diplomats, as well as sports federations and non-governmental organizations, have harnessed the mobilizing power of sport to pursue a range of aims: from asserting national interests and transmitting values to amplifying foreign policy messages, enhancing international reputation, and cultivating or deepening trust-based relationships.

In addition to major sporting events, this form of diplomacy also makes use of exchange programs, educational formats, and both physical and virtual meetings among the involved actors—diplomats, as it were, "in tracksuits." On a European level, the European Commission even established a dedicated working group on "sports diplomacy" in 2016, aiming to explore the political potential of sport for international organizations and supranational entities such as the EU.

With the rise of new states and alliances in the international system, a notable increase in the hosting of major sporting events in the BRICS countries has emerged. Since the early twenty-first century, sport mega-events have increasingly taken place in the so-called BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), as evidenced by Brazil's hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics; Russia's hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup; China's organization of the 2008 Summer and 2022 Winter Olympics; and South Africa's 2010 World Cup. This trend can be attributed both to a declining

number of bids from OECD countries and to the growing interest of BRICS nations themselves in leveraging such events for international prestige. International sports federations have readily embraced this shift, in part because the sports markets of OECD countries are now seen as saturated, while BRICS and other former emerging economies in Asia and Africa are regarded as possessing significant growth potential. Moreover, the typically autocratic governance structures in many of these states have facilitated the interests of international sports bodies, allowing for smoother implementation processes.

Numerous studies have emphasized that, while the political structures of the BRICS countries are often problematic from a democratic standpoint, they present, paradoxically, an ideal environment for international sports federations: referenda on public support are generally not required, political opposition can be side-lined, and there is typically no need to make substantial concessions to environmental groups or other critics.

At the same time, the expansion of major sporting events into the BRICS world has injected new momentum into the practice of sports diplomacy. The strategic use of such events to enhance international standing is frequently interpreted as part of a soft power approach (Brannagan & Giulianotti (2015); Brannagan & Giulianotti (2018); Grix et al., 2019). This kind of image politics has, in turn, provoked critical counter-reactions from Western democracies, expressed through diplomatic boycotts or symbolic acts of protest. Thus, sports diplomacy today represents more than a peripheral phenomenon accompanying international events—it is embedded within a complex interplay of power, morality, and media dynamics. While authoritarian regimes employ sport to legitimize their rule, democratic states utilize sports diplomacy as a vehicle for value transmission. Sport, in this context, becomes a contested arena of political symbolism.

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#### **4 Reinterpreting Sports Diplomacy: Qatar and the Arab Region**

In recent years, states from the Arab region have increasingly joined the ranks of the BRICS countries in strategically and long-term leveraging sport and major sporting events as political instruments (Kamrava, 2009; Sons, 2022). Of particular significance in this context is the Emirate of Qatar. Since gaining independence in 1971, Qatar has utilized its resources—especially oil and the world’s largest natural gas field—to become one of the wealthiest countries globally on a per capita income basis (Bauer & Stern, 1988).

From the mid-1990s onward, substantial investments by the Qatari sovereign wealth fund initiated a process of modernization and diversification, aimed at transforming the emirate into a metropolitan hub for tourists, business travellers, and, above all, sport, through extensive infrastructural development. This sports strategy forms an integral part of the “Qatar National Vision 2030,” which seeks to reduce the country’s dependence on fossil fuels and establish Qatar as an international knowledge and service centre. Sport thereby serves both as an economic sector and a diplomatic networking tool, particularly with Western states. Simultaneously, Qatar reinforces its regional role through sporting presence—serving as a counterbalance to rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Qatari ruling family commissioned the construction of the Aspire Academy, one of the largest sports academies worldwide, and has since hosted numerous prestigious international sporting events annually (Sons, 2022). Since 1993, the Qatar ExxonMobil Open tennis tournament has been held yearly in Doha, with inaugural champion Boris Becker and regular participants including top players such as Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. In cycling, the Tour of Qatar (2002–2016) became an important winter race before being discontinued for climatic reasons. The emirate hosted the 2015 Men’s Handball World Championship and, in 2019, for the first time in the Gulf region, the Athletics World Championships. Qatar also holds a prominent position in motorsports: since 2004, the Losail International Circuit has been the venue for the Qatar Motorcycle Grand Prix, and since 2021, Formula 1 races have been held there. Moreover, Doha has established itself as a host city for swimming and gymnastics competitions, including the 2014 Short Course Swimming World Championships and the 2018 Gymnastics World Championships. Today, only a few sports have yet to stage world championships in Qatar. The country itself achieved runner-up status in the 2015 Handball World Championship and became Asian football champion in 2019, defeating established football nations such as South Korea and Japan. The hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup marked the provisional apex of this trajectory, while an Olympic bid remains under consideration.

The political dimension of this strategy became starkly apparent during the so-called Qatar crisis from 2017 to 2021, when Qatar was largely isolated by neighbouring Gulf states—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates—and Egypt (Steinberg, 2023). On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council allies severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and closed their borders. A decisive factor for this rupture was Qatar’s financial and logistical support for radical Islamist organizations, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia cited as grounds for isolating the monarchy. All land, sea, and air connections were cut

off; Qatar Airways was denied landing rights and overflight permissions revoked. In mid-August 2020, Saudi Arabia announced it would reopen its border to Qatar for the Hajj pilgrimage. By January 2021, Saudi Arabia ended the blockade against Qatar through Kuwaiti mediation. Political analysts at times even considered a Saudi invasion of Qatar possible during this conflict but viewed Qatar's sports diplomacy—and the attendant global visibility and support it garnered—as a crucial safeguard for the emirate (Sons, 2022).

Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has pursued a similarly comprehensive sports strategy, following Qatar's example, as part of its national development plan "Vision 2030". Besides expanding the domestic sports industry, acquiring and marketing global e-sports leagues, and enhancing the Saudi Pro League with superstars such as Ronaldo and Benzema, major sporting events play a central role. Hosting events such as the Italian and Spanish football Super Cups, a high-profile golf tour, Formula 1 races, and the Dakar Rally, Saudi Arabia has already realized key objectives, which it seeks to augment through bids for further mega-events. Following the award of the 2023 FIFA Club World Cup and the 2029 Asian Winter Games, Saudi Arabia recently secured the hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

Saudi Arabia is unlikely to be the last Middle Eastern state to capitalize on sport's soft power potential. However, given the considerably more critical human rights situation in the kingdom—particularly concerning the state leadership's role in the assassination of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the highly scrutinized treatment of women's rights—further contentious debates over sports and politics in the region seem inevitable.

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## **5 The Debate on the Working Conditions of Migrant Workers at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar**

The discourse surrounding the inhumane working conditions on the construction sites for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar extended over more than a decade (BBC, 2022). Central to this debate was the treatment of migrant laborers predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, who were employed under the restrictive Kafala system. This controversy was driven chiefly by human rights organizations, trade unions, journalists, and governmental actors from Europe and North America.

Immediately following the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar in December 2010, critical voices began to emerge. As early as 2011, international trade union federations such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) sharply criticized the working and living conditions of the workforce, primarily originating

from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The core accusation concerned the Kafala system, which legally binds foreign workers to their employers and denies them fundamental rights, including changing jobs or leaving the country. This system has frequently been described as a modern form of forced labour. The protest movement was strongly driven from Germany, as Michael Sommer, then chair of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), simultaneously presided over the ITUC. In October 2013, Sommer asserted that the decision to award the World Cup to Qatar was based on evidently questionable grounds and that it was unacceptable for the tournament to be held in a country that treated its workers akin to slaves. Sommer pursued a strategy to mobilize the 25 members of the FIFA Executive Committee towards demanding reforms, attempting to engage union leaders from the countries represented by these FIFA officials. This culminated in discussions with FIFA President Sepp Blatter and the German Football Association (DFB), which, however, yielded no immediate consequences. The DGB found support domestically from unions such as IG BAU and internationally from the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI), which launched multiple campaigns and legal initiatives. Notably, BWI initiated the "Red Card for FIFA" campaign, filed a complaint against FIFA with the OECD under the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and pursued action before the International Labour Organization (ILO) for violations of the Forced Labour Convention.

Significant international attention was galvanized by a 2013 investigative report by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, which documented numerous deaths among Nepalese workers. In subsequent years, further harrowing details emerged, including fatalities from heat stress, unpaid wages, unsanitary living conditions, and passport confiscations. NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch regularly published reports highlighting "systematic exploitation," "forced labor," and "degrading conditions." (Amnesty International (2022a); Amnesty International (2022b); Human Rights Watch (2020)). Citing these reports, both the UN Human Rights Council and the European Parliament repeatedly called for reforms. The UN Human Rights Council referenced its 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), designed to prevent and remedy human rights abuses in business contexts. These principles are directed at corporations across all industries and sectors. Against this backdrop, it has been argued that organized sports actors such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), given their global economic engagement, revenue, and influence, bear a responsibility to respect human rights in accordance with the UNGPs (Bowersox, 2018).

In response to mounting international pressure, Qatar announced a cooperation agreement with the ILO in 2017. This partnership initiated a gradual reform pro-

cess that yielded significant changes. The positions of BWI, German unions, and the ILO shifted substantially thereafter. Following the admission of independent international labour inspections on construction sites in 2017, BWI publicly acknowledged notable progress, including the phased abolition of the Kafala system, the introduction of a minimum wage (2021), the establishment of labour courts, and improved standards for worker accommodations. By 2022, it was highlighted that workers on construction sites had their own representatives, access to complaint mechanisms and meetings, and the possibility to change employers. These reforms were positively assessed by the ILO (2020), which established a dedicated project office in Doha in 2018, although many NGOs continued to regard these changes as insufficient and incomplete.

As the World Cup approached, NGOs intensified their campaigns, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, FairSquare, and Equidem, advocating for compensation for affected workers and their families. Amnesty International Germany frequently voiced concerns through talk shows, newspapers, and radio programs. Markus N. Beeko, Secretary General of Amnesty International Germany, emerged as a leading spokesperson, emphasizing that while Qatar had initiated reforms, many of these improvements remained merely nominal. This critique was substantiated by a “Reality Check 2021” report (Amnesty International, 2021). Amnesty, alongside other international sections and organizations, called for FIFA to establish a compensation fund for exploited workers and bereaved families, estimating the fund at no less than USD 440 million—the equivalent of the World Cup prize money. To amplify their demand, Amnesty Germany collected signatures and engaged in dialogue with the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the DFB, and members of the Bundestag, aiming to exert political pressure on FIFA and Qatari authorities. This pressure peaked in the immediate lead-up to the tournament but waned afterward, and the compensation fund was never implemented, partly due to FIFA’s persistent refusal. Throughout the campaign, Amnesty repeatedly stressed that it did not support a boycott, arguing that such an action would harm migrant workers by undermining reform efforts and diminishing international attention. Instead, governments, associations, sponsors, media, and fans were urged to use their voices to pressure FIFA and Qatar.

NGOs were supported by several national football associations and individual politicians, notably in Germany by Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser. The DFB also adopted these demands, having even contemplated boycotts in June 2017. Then-DFB President Reinhard Grindel remarked amid the Gulf blockade of Qatar that there should be a fundamental consensus to deny major tournaments to countries with severe human rights violations and to consider boycotts, although this position lacked majority support. This was evident during a public hearing of

the Bundestag's Sports Committee on July 4, 2022, titled "FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar and Human Rights Violations," where civil society representatives, academics, and the DFB debated the ethical, political, and legal implications of the World Cup's awarding. While the DFB and unions favoured dialogue over boycott, Amnesty International and human rights experts called for stricter enforcement and increased pressure on labour standards and reparations. Ultimately, the debate revealed the fundamental tensions between sports-political pragmatism and human rights imperatives.

In the immediate lead-up to the World Cup, some football associations renewed their activism, with teams, including Germany's national team, sending symbolic messages. For example, prior to their qualifying match against Iceland, the German team wore hand-painted T-shirts bearing the slogan "Human Rights." This action was coordinated with the national teams of Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands, who engaged in similar campaigns.

Alongside Amnesty International, and CNN (Montague (2013)), *The Guardian* emerged as one of the principal critical voices in the migrant worker debate ahead of the World Cup. It was among the first major international newspapers to publicly expose the human rights abuses on the World Cup construction sites. The first major exposé, published on September 25, 2013, was titled "Revealed: Qatar's World Cup 'slaves'" and focused on Nepalese workers. *The Guardian* maintained extensive coverage over the years. Particularly influential was its February 23, 2021 article, "Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded," which published a figure that reverberated globally: 6500 deaths among migrant workers from five South Asian countries since 2010. Although the article clarified that not all fatalities were attributable to World Cup projects, this number profoundly shaped public and political discourse. The death toll became a pivotal point in the debates, with Amnesty citing 15,000 deaths between 2010 and 2019, while the organizing committee reported only three construction site fatalities and 37 "non-work-related deaths." German TV news programs such as *Tagesschau* and *ZDF* echoed these figures in December 2021, referencing Amnesty International and noting that 15,021 non-Qataris had died, with 70% of deaths remaining unexplained.

UN reports, ILO statements, and numerous German newspaper articles frequently cited *The Guardian* as the primary source. The paper's investigations intensified the debate, as FIFA was compelled to respond to reform demands, the Qatari government publicly defended its reforms, and human rights organizations, governments, and sponsors issued statements. *The Guardian* thus assumed a classic journalistic watchdog role in the Qatar debate, becoming a central agenda-setter in the global discussion on labour rights, human rights, and sports diplomacy sur-

rounding the 2022 World Cup (Papanikos, 2023). The coverage of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar by leading German media partly followed a similar pattern but was also marked by a degree of moral grandstanding, with structural shortcomings within Germany's own sports and media systems largely left unaddressed. In a few rare moments of self-reflection, this tendency was acknowledged—namely, that rather than fostering a nuanced dialogue, German media often adopted a moralizing stance that broadly delegitimized conditions in Qatar (Herden, 2022).

In sum, the debates on the working conditions of migrant laborers in connection with the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar produced far-reaching political, legal, and institutional consequences both within Qatar and for sports governance. Initially triggered by traditional national and international trade unions as well as investigative journalism—particularly *The Guardian*—and amplified by campaign work from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, both FIFA and the Qatari state came under substantial international pressure. Not least due to public scrutiny, FIFA incorporated corresponding human rights principles into its statutes following the publication of a human rights report in 2019. Article 3 states: “FIFA commits to respecting all internationally recognized human rights and strives to protect these rights.”

In response to criticism, Qatar, in cooperation with the ILO, implemented a series of labour law reforms (ILO, 2021). The abolition of the employer's consent requirement for job changes was regarded as a milestone in a regional context long characterized by structurally entrenched exploitative dependency relations. Nevertheless, numerous observers criticized that these reforms often existed only on paper and that many companies deliberately circumvented their implementation. Concurrently, changes occurred in national and international sports governance. In 2015, several NGOs and trade unions formed the Sport & Rights Alliance to strengthen human rights in sport, highlight violations, and combat corruption. In Germany, the “Centre for Human Rights and Sport,” the “Network Sport and Politics for Fairness, Respect and Human Dignity,” and the association “Athletes Germany” intensified their activities.

Under intense pressure, FIFA announced it would henceforth consider human rights as a fixed criterion in the awarding of tournaments. A potentially crucial role in this regard may be played by the Geneva-based Centre for Sport and Human Rights (CSHR). Founded in 2018, the Centre emerged during the Qatar debate as a significant actor advocating for the structural integration of human rights standards into sports governance. In a 2022 report, the CSHR emphasized: “Human rights due diligence is not optional. All stakeholders must anticipate risks and prevent abuses proactively – not retroactively respond to scandal” (CSHR, 2022). The Centre called on international sports bodies such as FIFA and the IOC not merely

to declare human rights due diligence, but to institutionalize and enforce it bindingly. Thus, the foundation was laid for a long-term development in which actors like CSHR, the ILO, and civil society organizations are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in the future.

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## **6 The ‘One Love’ Armband Conflict: Symbolic Protest as a Defining Feature of Sport Mega Events**

How narrow the line has become on which sports protest now unfolds, and how challenging it is for sports associations to position themselves amid various “proxy conflicts,” was exemplified by the debate surrounding human rights issues that culminated in the controversy over the “One Love” armband at the 2022 World Cup. This debate, which unfolded in the immediate run-up to the tournament, became one of the most symbolic conflicts concerning the political role of sport at global mega-events. However, without the preceding controversy over the rainbow flag at EURO 2021—where Germany once again played a central role—the debate is difficult to fully comprehend.

During the transnational EURO 2021, the Munich city council, supported by the German Football Association (DFB), proposed illuminating the Munich football stadium in rainbow colors during the Germany vs. Hungary match. This was intended to send a signal of diversity and solidarity with the LGBTIQ+\* community, while simultaneously protesting against the right-wing nationalist government of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, which had recently restricted the informational rights of young people on these issues. While UEFA had previously approved that the captain of the German national team, Manuel Neuer, could wear a rainbow captain’s armband throughout the tournament, UEFA rejected Munich’s request, citing the explicitly political context of the proposal. Nevertheless, rainbow flags were present around the stadium, supplied by human rights organizations to fans numbering in the tens of thousands. The ambivalence of the situation was further underscored by the fact that UEFA itself coloured its otherwise red-circled logo in rainbow hues on social media, declaring pride in displaying the colours of the rainbow.

The situation became even more complex in 2022, with the FIFA World Cup hosted in Qatar. The political ambivalence was made explicit in the run-up to the tournament during a session of the German Bundestag’s Sports Committee. Held on November 7, 2022, and titled “Football World Cup 2022 in Qatar – How does sport uphold human rights?,” this hearing was a key political event prior to the tournament, clearly highlighting the tensions and controversies the topic sparked

within Germany. Participants included representatives from human rights organizations, sports officials, and academics. FIFA was criticized as overly conciliatory toward authoritarian regimes and inconsistent in enforcing its own human rights statutes. The DFB faced reproach for prolonged passivity. While association representatives pointed to ongoing human rights dialogues, many parliamentarians demanded a clearer, earlier, and more resolute stance.

Discussions also addressed whether Germany should pursue future sports-political consequences, such as reconsidering tournament allocations, influencing FIFA decisions, or sending diplomatic signals. However, most experts rejected a boycott as counterproductive, setting themselves apart from numerous football clubs' initiatives. In October and November 2022, fans in many Bundesliga stadiums displayed banners opposing the World Cup, some calling explicitly for a boycott. Such actions took place at Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich, Hertha Berlin, SC Freiburg, Mainz, and Fortuna Düsseldorf, accompanied by flyers and discussion events. Dietrich Schulze-Marmeling argued that, without the provocative call for a boycott, the debate surrounding the World Cup would likely have remained limited to general cultural commentary about the host country. At the same time, the many creative actions initiated by the critical fan scene—actions that addressed not only conditions in the host nation but also scrutinized the policies of football governing bodies—would probably not have emerged (Schulze-Marmeling, 2022).

Amid ongoing debates about the World Cup's award to Qatar, Germany and six other Western countries (including Belgium, Denmark, England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Wales) sought to send a signal. To protest the working conditions of migrant workers and the discrimination against members of the LGBTIQ+\* community in the emirate, several European teams intended to wear a variant of the rainbow armband—the “One Love” armband—as a statement of diversity. The “One Love” campaign, originally launched in 2020 by the Dutch Football Association, symbolized diversity, openness, and opposition to homophobia and all forms of discrimination. Ahead of the Qatar World Cup, the seven European football associations decided that their captains would wear the rainbow armband featuring a heart symbol. The aim was to make a symbolic stand for human rights, specifically against Qatar's criminalization of homosexuality. The DFB had repeatedly emphasized that it was not an apolitical association and sought to defend human rights values. In April 2021, it was the first German individual sports federation to adopt a human rights policy, explicitly committing in its statutes to respect for human rights.

However, FIFA reacted the day before the opening match by threatening sporting sanctions against players who wore the armband (Syed, 2022; Tharoor, 2022).

Specifically, the associations were informed that captains wearing the unauthorized armband would face a yellow card at the start of the match. Under this pressure, the involved associations ultimately withdrew the armband after internal consultations. The DFB stated jointly with the other six associations that they would not place players in a position where they could be penalized on the field. This decision provoked massive criticism from both the public and politicians.

A particularly prominent figure in this dispute was German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD). She had previously criticized Qatar's human rights record in several national media outlets. In an October 2022 interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin*, she described the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar as highly problematic and argued that sports events should not be held in countries that do not respect human rights. When diplomatic tensions with Qatar followed, she decided against pursuing the initially considered diplomatic boycott and instead accepted an invitation from the Qatari Prime Minister to attend the World Cup. Through her visit, she sought to send a political signal without fully boycotting the event. She sharply criticized FIFA for suppressing political statements and conspicuously wore the One Love armband during Germany's opening match at the stadium. Sitting in the VIP box of the Khalifa International Stadium, she was seated directly beside FIFA President Gianni Infantino. Several photos taken for the international press circulated worldwide, including one showing Infantino standing next to Faeser, smiling and pointing to the armband. Faeser herself emphasized that she confronted Infantino critically and told him that FIFA's ban was a grave mistake. In an official statement, she declared, "It is incomprehensible that FIFA wants to silence players by threatening them with sporting sanctions." Many viewed this gesture as a powerful political statement—especially since Faeser had publicly addressed the human rights situation in Qatar beforehand. However, her visit also sparked political controversy, as some perceived her acceptance of Qatar's official invitation as ambiguous.

Many media outlets, civil society organizations, and political actors regarded Faeser's gesture as an important political signal at a moment when other actors—particularly FIFA and the DFB—had retreated. Amnesty International Germany praised the gesture, asserting it was appropriate to visibly address human rights in Qatar. Simultaneously, FIFA was identified as a central actor increasingly contradicting its own proclaimed values. Then-FIFA President Gianni Infantino defended the association's stance by arguing that political statements have no place in sports tournaments—a position widely criticized in expert circles and the press as hypocritical. Critics accused Faeser of making merely a symbolic gesture without following it up with concrete political measures or consequences. Opposition parties charged her with exploiting the World Cup stage for self-promotion and conduct-

ing foreign policy in the guise of sport, without exerting substantive influence on Qatar's human rights situation.

The DFB became increasingly critical of FIFA afterward. President Bernd Neuendorf described FIFA's actions as an unprecedented demonstration of power and announced plans to explore legal options. The association even briefly filed a lawsuit with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to gain approval for the armband—a process that, however, was not resolved in time. As a symbolic act, the German national team posed for the pre-match photo against Japan with their hands covering their mouths—an unspoken protest against what they perceived as FIFA's imposed “gag order.” This protest received wide international attention but also provoked ridicule and incomprehension—especially since the team subsequently failed to progress in the tournament. In the aftermath, the DFB was self-critical. President Neuendorf stated that the association had not asserted itself sufficiently in the confrontation with FIFA. At the same time, he emphasized that the DFB intended to advocate more consistently for human rights, especially in future tournament allocations.

Within German society, the armband debate sparked a broader discussion about morality, symbolic politics, and the limits of sporting responsibility. While some praised Faeser's and the DFB's gestures as important signals, others criticized the symbolism as inadequate or even hypocritical given the prior failure to clearly oppose Qatar as World Cup host in a timely manner. The Cologne-based retail company Rewe terminated its cooperation with the DFB with immediate effect due to FIFA's decision regarding the One Love armband. The company explicitly distanced itself from FIFA's stance and statements by President Gianni Infantino and announced it would forgo advertising rights under its existing contract with the DFB related to the World Cup.

Overall, the controversy surrounding the One Love armband revealed the deep conflict between political symbolism and sporting pragmatism. It can be concluded that while the DFB fundamentally supported human rights, in the concrete situation it vacillated between symbolic politics and political pressure exerted by FIFA. Nevertheless, the experience led to a pronounced politicization of the association, which has since intensified its rhetorical commitment to human rights standards at future major events. The dispute also underscored, once again, the limited scope for national actors to act against the power of a global organization like FIFA—and how sporting mega-events have increasingly become stages for political and moral negotiations.

## **7 Conclusions: Politicization and Protest as Constant Companions of Future Major Sporting Events**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is widely regarded as the most politicized edition of the tournament to date—not only due to the geopolitical tensions in the Gulf region but also because of the intense global debates surrounding human rights, labour conditions, and freedom of expression. Throughout the event, it became evident how deeply intertwined major sporting events have become with issues of international norms, diplomatic interests, and symbolic politics. Even prior to the tournament, the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar in 2010 had been marred by serious corruption allegations, which significantly undermined trust in FIFA. However, international criticism soon concentrated on the human rights situation on the ground, particularly concerning the plight of migrant workers who constructed much of the tournament's infrastructure under often precarious conditions. Both labour unions and non-governmental organizations repeatedly drew attention to these abuses and demanded reforms in Qatari labour law—with partial success: under international pressure, the kafala sponsorship system was formally abolished and minimum wage regulations introduced.

These issues were compounded by protests before and during the World Cup, notably the One Love debate around symbolic armbands representing diversity and opposition to discrimination. The attempt by several European national teams to display such a symbol was blocked by FIFA on the grounds of rule violations—an incident that revealed the limits of symbolic player diplomacy and sports diplomacy more broadly, triggering political reactions extending into government circles. The consequences of this politicization are ambivalent: on one hand, awareness of social responsibility in sport has increased; on the other hand, the resilience of authoritarian host states and the limited efficacy of symbolic protests remain apparent. Above all, the tournament highlighted FIFA's dominant role in international sports politics—despite its failures and reputational damage. This raises an urgent question for future tournaments: how can binding human rights standards be embedded within awarding processes and event management, beyond mere public relations mechanisms?

The 2022 World Cup also demonstrated the virtually limitless scope of sports-related protest. Even if future shifts in international sports organizations' awarding policies reduce occasions for humanitarian protests, major sporting events will undoubtedly retain a political dimension and thus remain stages for protest. In the foreseeable future, such protests are more likely to take the form of demonstrative and symbolic acts rather than outright boycotts. This mode of protest holds

considerable symbolic power: it is highly visible and readily mediated by the press. The boycott debate during the 2022 World Cup was never monolithic but rather fuelled by political statements, media-amplified positions, and grassroots fan actions. Ultimately, although the tournament was not officially boycotted, the very calls for boycott significantly increased public pressure, created a moral tension, and intensified the perception of the World Cup as a moral and political test.

Whether protest repertoires will remain limited to low-threshold forms given the constraints imposed by sport governing bodies on athletes and players is still unclear, especially in light of the considerable excitement and emotionalization surrounding the 2022 tournament. As long as protest does not fundamentally challenge or irreparably damage the integrity of sport, but rather holds up a mirror to the sporting world or highlights shortcomings in the manner of a cautionary tale, sport and protest will continue to be closely linked.

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