

The men's world cup in Qatar 2022 through the lens of the western media: soft power, sports diplomacy and sportswashing

Abstract

The chapter examines Western journalistic discourses from the perspective of culture, political values, and international relations during the coverage of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. We explore Soft Power, Sports Diplomacy, and Sportswashing concepts and analyze the discourses through a historical context about the Islamic and Arabic World, Qatari academics' perspectives, human rights issues, and international media placement. Considerations include the use of sports to position Qatar as an active player in development programs and to present positive facts to improve geopolitics in the region.

Keywords: soft power, sportswashing, sports diplomacy, human rights, international media coverage, world cup analysis, FIFA, Qatar

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Introduction

In the 21st century, Qatar has invested in sports to position itself as a modern state while addressing youth physical inactivity.^{1,2} This investment aims to strengthen the national high-performance system in Asia and internationally, particularly in athletics, swimming, squash, beach volleyball, 3x3 basketball, handball, and soccer. The strategy includes significant investments in sports infrastructure and the naturalization of top athletes. Qatar's commitment also involves purchasing European football teams, sports sponsorships, and developing the Qatar Aspire Academy. Qatar Sports Investments purchased Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2011, elevating PSG to a top European football club with star players like Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, and Lionel Messi. QSI has also invested in other clubs, including a minority stake in the Portuguese club Braga and potential investments in Premier League clubs (Doha News, 2023; Sky Sports, 2023; DW, 2021). Another goal is to diversify revenue through direct investments in sports and hosting international events, notably the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup, linked to mega-urban regeneration projects initiated by the 2006 Asian Games. To improve its image, Qatar has addressed issues related to construction workers' conditions, gender concerns, and cultural adaptations for Western executives.

The government has implemented labor reforms addressing the Kafala system, worker contracts, mobility, health, safety, and introduced a minimum wage policy. The International Labour Organization (ILO) opened an office in Doha, and the Supreme Committee (SC) for Delivery and Legacy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) for worker welfare programs. These reforms follow scrutiny and pressure from international labor and human rights organizations, leading to progress on exit visas and wage protection.³ Despite progress, substantial work remains to enforce these reforms. The World Cup hosting has triggered protests and controversy, particularly regarding freedom of expression and compensation for workers injured or killed during stadium construction. These issues highlight Qatar's contradictions as it tries to project a modern image while managing criticisms.³

This article examines how Western journalistic discourses addressed Qatar during the World Cup, focusing on culture, political values, and international relations. It is divided into four parts: the first discusses mega-events as a state strategy—soft power, sports diplomacy, and sportswashing. The second examines newspapers' role in the international public sphere. The third outlines the data collection framework and analysis format. Finally, the journalistic material is discussed and analyzed using the proposed framework.

Soft power, sports diplomacy and sportswashing

Qatar has mobilized sports to assert nationalism and support pan-Arab and pan-Islamic ideologies. The adoption of sport in the Arab world, mainly through events like the Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic Games, has been a strategic tool for nation-state formation and promoting development ideologies (Amara, 2021). These events illustrate how Arab countries, including Qatar, use sports to engage with both Islamic values and secular ideologies, positioning themselves within broader regional identities.

The Gulf Petro-monarchies perpetuate history and tradition as sources of authenticity, intertwined with religious institutions and business interests. However, the acceptance of values from the free flow of capital and products does not extend to the free movement of people across Arab borders or between the Arab region and other regions. Internal conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya exacerbate this issue. These conflicts arise from distinct historical, political, and social contexts, turning the region into a complex battleground involving various Arab countries and external allies like Iran, Turkey, the United States, Russia, France, and Britain. The development of Gulf countries, strongly linked to the discovery of oil, has led to significant economic and demographic growth. While oil and gas revenue has profoundly impacted urban regeneration and economic growth, it is also influenced by their rich historical context and the impacts of colonization. Gulf countries have embraced national development models focused on cultural integration and mass industry.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) development model, characterized by closer economic, political, and military coordination, has faced challenges due to political turbulence, such as the blockade on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Qatar uses sports, especially football, to position itself as an active participant in development and aid programs aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Qatar Vision 2030. These initiatives help counter negative perceptions, addressing demographic changes and promoting sports reforms within the country.² Sporting practices also bolster international relations and enhance its position in discussions related to solidarity and conflict resolution, improving the geopolitical landscape in the region.

Global scrutiny of Qatar's prominent role in sports has led to suspicions about its strategic interests. Some foreign media outlets portray Qatar as lacking a deep-rooted sports culture and being resistant to international norms, including gender and sexuality equality. According to Chris Doyle, the World Cup represents Qatar's rapid and ongoing reforms since the mid-1990s, driven by ambitions to place itself prominently on the global map.⁴

As the inaugural Arab and Muslim FIFA World Cup host, Qatar has faced substantial criticism due to its recent involvement in modern sports and the global football scene, along with its dominant Islamic culture. International media framed Qatari Islamism as a challenge, prompting Qatar to prioritize meeting FIFA's infrastructure and logistical requirements. Qatar relies on the international football industry's brand image, operating through sponsorships, direct investments, and attracting professional players to the Qatar Professional League. PSG has been a key vehicle for enhancing its global image, particularly through high-profile signings like Neymar and Lionel Messi, who increase the visibility of Qatar's investments. These players serve as ambassadors for football development projects, promoting Qatar's image on the international stage.⁵ This section analyzes Qatar's sports strategy to gain global Soft Power, demonstrating how the country has used sports for modernization and diplomacy. Increased global attention has led to greater scrutiny of domestic policies, resulting in widespread criticism over allegations of corruption and labor abuses against migrant workers. Consequently, critics view Qatar as an example of Sportswashing.

Qatar's involvement in global sports is part of a broader strategy where resource-rich states invest in international sports as a form of public diplomacy, enhancing their global presence and influence. The goal is to rebrand their image as modern, liberal, and Western and to gain attraction through their association with global sports.⁶ Qatar uses sports strategically, focusing on hosting international sports events, investing in global sports, promoting the country's success at the elite sports level, and engaging sports stars to publicly support its political regime and society. Rapid advancements in information and communication technology have shifted international affairs, with actors like NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, and mass media playing increasingly influential roles.⁷ These changes offer new avenues for diplomatic conduct, strengthening sports diplomacy.

Sports diplomacy is multifaceted. For Murray, it involves using athletes and events to engage, inform, and create a favorable image among foreign audiences to shape perceptions conducive to achieving a government's foreign policy goal.⁸ It acts as a tool of soft power, attracting and influencing through cultural or value-based means.⁹ It contributes to national branding and the global reputation of a country,

enhancing its attractiveness and facilitating diplomatic relations.⁹ It leverages sport for peace and development, promoting tolerance, respect, and social inclusion.⁹

Strong criticisms from human rights organizations, including Amnesty International (2019) and Human Rights Watch, as well as influential global newspapers like The Guardian and The New York Times, have eroded the credibility of Qatar's sports strategy.

Football has proven to be an ideal tool for repressive regimes looking to alter their image through sports. By associating with globally renowned football clubs, these States seek to change their image, using the glamour of the game to overshadow their human rights abuses at home. They leverage the sport's status as the premier global spectacle shared worldwide as a means of washing their image.⁶ However, the effectiveness and reception of these efforts are not uniform. Investments in sport do not reliably generate the anticipated benefits and can positively recoil on their users in unanticipated ways.¹⁰ Some states may succeed in temporarily improving their image, but others face significant backlash and criticism from international observers and human rights organizations (p. 713). This underscores the complex and varied outcomes of using sports diplomacy as a public relations strategy (p. 721).

The newspaper as an articulator of the international public sphere

Globalization has significantly impacted journalistic content, facilitating the rise of transnational media corporations and leading to the homogenization of news content across regions. This shift is reflected in global news networks prioritizing global over local perspectives (Steger (2017) notes that "the dominant symbolic systems of meaning of our age – such as individualism, consumerism, and various religious discourses – circulate more freely and widely than ever before" (p. 70). The consolidation of major media corporations has led to a "homogenized popular culture" transcending national boundaries. The mass culture of transnational capitalism has blurred the boundaries between erudite culture, popular culture, and advertising, transforming cultural and journalistic boundaries. This convergence highlights the link between media consolidation and the transformation of these boundaries.

Even the World Cup has become a consumer product within a highly profitable cultural industry for FIFA, transcending the notion of being a mere sports competition among nations. The World Cup, as a marketable item, has become increasingly present in the lives of its audience/recipient/consumer in all its editions. This presence extends from promoting significant brands and locations, ticket sales practices, new stadium construction, tourism and hospitality improvements in host cities, advancements in television marketing and transmission, internet broadcasts, and international journalistic media. With the shift in "how to" practice journalism, conveying events becomes as important as the obligation to critically inform society about global occurrences. The current moment serves as a backdrop to reconsider the principles that govern factual discourse and, thus, to reflect on the role of journalism, "reshaping the role of text producers and that of the reader as (re)producers of discourses".¹¹

As Habermas (2012a) proposes, no communication vehicle writes in vain; it presupposes another person's existence, an intrinsic need inherent to the social nature of language. Communication, journalism, culture, and narrative demand consideration in the new global scenario. The purpose is to imbue meaning into speech, embedding language in

the World of Life. It's a sign of exchange, of relationship, observing the unfolding world. Journalism is a historical and cultural process where language encompasses events, creating meaning. Understanding culture is vital for generating communicative discourses. By embedding language within the World of Life, as emphasized by Habermas, journalism does more than merely report events; it actively participates in the construction of social reality. Therefore, the role of journalism extends beyond information dissemination to include the critical task of fostering informed and reflective public discourse. In contemporary communication, language is elevated to its maximum as an act of discourse, pointing to how the circulation of communicative acts is organized within a social community to produce meanings. Thus, "it can be said that information implies a production process in a communication situation".¹²

The media, with its multiple roles, including informative, economical, political, and sociological, is understood through its communicative characteristics. There's no naivety in recognizing its systemic structure, driven by economic and political logic. While operating as businesses, they also contribute to constructing the public sphere. However, the focus will be on the symbolic logic that leads every information system to have a vocation to participate in the construction of the public sphere. Also, while this analysis centers on Western media, it is important to acknowledge that local contexts, such as the Qatari media landscape, interact with global trends in unique ways. Although not the primary focus here, understanding these interactions can provide a more comprehensive picture of media dynamics worldwide.

The journalist shapes events into news, and articles serve as a means of communication to inform the audience and facilitate their understanding. In the journalistic process, personal meaning is attributed to the act, considering factors like the recipient's identity, knowledge, social position, psychological state, abilities, and interests, as well as the intended effect, relationship, and regulation. In a country with a wide ethnic-cultural diversity and an event of this nature, which is the FIFA World Cup, multiple and unstable identities become even more visible as we problematize and try to characterize them. Qatar does not differ from the colonies and former empires that became liberated countries. Like them, "no matter how new and unprecedented their emergence may be, they require a history and a flag". Only in this way can their memory of the old empire be "dominated by the history of the creation of the new country, which tends to take the form of a founding myth of struggle and liberation".¹³

With cameras from around the world focused on Qatar, the media allows itself to construct the identity of a country through multiple personal identities, multiple interviewed characters, and multiple facets constructed from the published reports. Communication serves as a pivotal realm for broad relativization, fostering the reevaluation of subject-object dynamics, bridging the familiar and distant, and challenging cultural hierarchies. The media's coverage of the FIFA World Cup often brings to light historical criticisms and controversies surrounding the organization. Media scrutiny during these events exposes issues like corruption, governance failures, and the socio-political implications of hosting the tournament. This critical perspective is essential for understanding the current media landscape, as it contextualizes the broader narrative within which these global events occur. By examining these controversies, the media not only shapes but also critiques the constructed identities, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between global media and local contexts.¹⁴

Description of the technique for collecting international journalistic material

The concept of soft power, coined by Joseph Nye, explains a country's ability to influence others through attraction and appeal rather than coercion. A country's soft power relies on its resources, categorized into culture, political values, and foreign policies. Therefore, the World Cup of 2022, hosted by Qatar, has been used as a platform to showcase these resources, thereby boosting their soft power on the global stage.¹⁴ Soft power is exerted through international media, which shapes these events for a global audience, influencing perceptions through specific cultural and political narratives. The legacy of soft power extends beyond sports into cultural exchange, economic benefits, and increased political leverage.¹⁵ Within academia, Nye's theory is an effective tool for analyzing the rise of the political global south. The concept of fluidity legitimizes soft power, viewing military and economic coercion as less effective in achieving international prestige, allowing nations to rise within the established order.¹⁵ Mega-events promote the host country's image globally and reach a worldwide media audience through universal values.¹⁵

Nye categorizes the sources of soft power into three main areas: culture, political values, and international policy.¹⁵ Mega-events present an opportunity to be in the spotlight of international politics. Culture is promoted by the event, with tourists exploring the country and experiencing its diverse cultural manifestations. The opening and closing ceremonies showcase the nation's achievements. Political values are conveyed through the competition's organization and the functioning of institutions. International policy is highlighted by the host country's interactions with other nations, establishing a global presence and demonstrating its ability to host large-scale events successfully.

Data collection process

The data collection process involved eight steps:

Accessing the websites: Websites were accessed daily for consistency.

Searching in two sections: The Editorial and World Cup sections were searched.

Copying the links: Links of selected articles were copied for tracking.

Collection period: Collection occurred from three days before the event started until three days after its conclusion.

First reading: Removed duplicate articles.

Second reading: Categorized articles into culture, political values, and international politics.

Third reading: Identified specific discourses related to the public sphere, sports diplomacy, and sportswashing.

Selecting articles: Most relevant articles were chosen for analysis.

Selection criteria and categories

Nine newspapers were analyzed based on their global impact: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) from the United Kingdom, Bild from Germany, Clarín from Argentina, Cable News Network (CNN) from the United States, El País from Spain, Folha de São Paulo from Brazil, Le Monde from France, The New York Times from the United States, and The Guardian from the United Kingdom. Articles containing keywords like Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power, International Politics, Political Values, and Culture were chosen.

After the collection, the articles were categorized as follows: Culture (CL), Political Values (PV), and International Politics (IP) (Table 1).

From the total of 497 articles analyzed, political values (PV) made up 41.7%, international politics (IP) accounted for 55.9%, and culture (CL) comprised 17.4%.

Table 1 Article categorization

| Categories | CL | PV | IP |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| BBC | 6 | 19 | 19 |
| CNN | 3 | 21 | 35 |
| THE GUARDIAN | 7 | 13 | 17 |
| NYT | 9 | 15 | 21 |
| LE MONDE | 10 | 5 | 4 |
| EL PAIS | 16 | 3 | 28 |
| BILD | 2 | 42 | 38 |
| CLARIN | 4 | 33 | 16 |
| FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO | 15 | 16 | 30 |
| Total | 76 | 180 | 241 |

The numbers indicate a predominance of articles categorized under political values (180), followed by international politics (241) and culture (76). This distribution reflects an emphasis on the coverage of political and diplomatic issues during the event, suggesting that the global media were particularly attentive to aspects of soft power and sports diplomacy surrounding the World Cup. The coverage focused on political values and international politics represents 76% of the total articles analyzed, highlighting the importance of these themes in the global media narrative. In contrast, culture, although significant, was less addressed, representing 24% of the total, which may indicate a perception of its lesser impact compared to political issues.

Discussion and analysis of the journalistic material from the Qatar 2022 cup

A few words about Islam and the Arab world

The term “Islamic countries” refers to regions predominantly influenced by the Islamic religion. This concept evolved to represent a group of countries from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ Historically, the Islamic world significantly influenced global events. The Islamic Golden Age (8th to 14th century) was a period of notable scientific, cultural, and economic advancements that profoundly impacted Europe and other parts of the world. Cities like Baghdad, Cordoba, and Damascus emerged as centers of learning and culture during this era.¹⁶ The FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar brought attention to how Islamic nations are perceived in Western media. Qatar’s choice as a predominantly Muslim host country highlighted discussions about representation in international media. Media coverage often focused on issues such as workers’ rights, gender equality, and freedom of expression, reflecting both criticisms and modernization efforts.¹⁴ The cultural and political values of Qatar were showcased during the World Cup, particularly through the opening and closing ceremonies designed to highlight the rich heritage of Qatar and the Islamic world. This was an effort to challenge and change stereotypical Western perceptions.¹⁷

Misconceptions about the Islamic world’s political and ideological situation often stem from superficial understandings that overlook its cultural diversity. Recognizing the distinct regions within the Islamic world, such as Arab, Iranian, Turkish, and Southeast Asian areas, allows for a more nuanced appreciation of these variations.¹⁶ Traditional Muslim geography begins with Arab countries, considered the birthplace of Islam and home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. However, significant diversity exists within the Arab world itself, with regions like the Maghreb (West) and Mashreq (East) encompassing various countries.¹⁶ Historically, these Islamic countries once formed part of larger Islamic states, such as the Caliphate or the Ottoman Empire. The spread of Islam has led to varied interpretations and applications of shari’a, reflecting a broad spectrum of legal and social practices (Kuru, 2019). Muslim jurists crafted a comprehensive law based on divine revelation, guiding the ideal society envisioned to be entirely subject to Islamic principles.¹⁶ The Quran, containing the revelations to Muhammad, serves as the primary source of Muslim law. The “sacred tradition” or sunna outlines the behavior and prescriptions for the faithful, including obedience to state authority. Differences between Sunni and Shia Islam result in varied traditions and legal interpretations.¹⁸

Qatari academics’ perspective on the world cup and the west

In 2010, Qatar became the smallest and first Middle Eastern country to host the FIFA World Cup. By 2012, Al Jazeera earned acclaim for its Arab Spring coverage, and in 2015, the Qatar Investment Authority became the majority shareholder of the UK real estate developer Canary Wharf Group. By 2017, Qatar Airways was recognized as the world’s best airline.¹⁹ These milestones highlight Qatar’s strategic use of “soft power,” defined as the “ability to achieve objectives through attraction rather than coercion”.¹⁹ Scholars emphasize the importance of mega sporting events in enhancing the nation’s global image and influence, showcasing modernization and commitment to global engagement.^{20,21} The Qatar Foundation’s record-breaking sponsorship of FC Barcelona in 2011, followed by Qatar Airways’ sponsorship deal, underscores this strategy.²² Qatar Airlines has also established itself as a key player in international sports, sponsoring various major events and partnering with renowned clubs like PSG and Bayern Munich.

In sports broadcasting, the inception of beIN Sports in 2012 marked a significant development, acquiring broadcasting rights for top-tier European leagues.²³ Nasser al-Khelaifi, chairman of PSG and QSI, also serves as the CEO of beIN Sports and a member of UEFA’s executive committee. Qatar’s stance on women’s rights is relatively advanced compared to other Gulf states, with significant reforms providing more opportunities for women in education and the workforce.²⁴ Despite this progress, women in Qatar still face occupational concentration in fields like education, healthcare, and clerical work.

The FIFA World Cup presented Qatar with an opportunity to redefine its identity, challenging longstanding orientalist stereotypes and reshaping global perceptions of the Arab world.¹⁹ Hosting the World Cup allowed Qatar to project itself as an open, tolerant, and equitable society. Government predictions, supported by University of Qatar researchers, suggest the World Cup will boost tourism, economic activities, and socio-cultural exchange. Hosting the World Cup is expected to enhance Qatar’s global tourism image, stimulate local economies, and facilitate cultural exchange.²⁵⁻²⁷

Human rights, migrants, and gender

Despite efforts to modernize, Qatar faces ongoing scrutiny over human rights issues linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. Concerns revolve around poverty, health, social well-being, gender equality, working conditions, social inequality, and access to justice and institutions. Significant challenges remain in gender equality, with women still facing legal and social barriers that limit their participation in society. Guardianship and inheritance laws favor men, requiring women to seek permission from a male guardian for many decisions. Qatar's wealth disparity is notable, with significant wage gaps between migrant workers (over 90% of the workforce) and Qatari nationals (about 10% of the population). Migrant workers, primarily from South Asia, face poor working conditions exacerbated by the kafala system, which ties workers to employers and limits their job mobility, creating a power imbalance that leaves workers vulnerable to abuse.²⁸ A migrant construction worker earns around US\$ 2,000 annually, while Qatari citizens earn approximately US\$ 700,000 annually. Foreigners do not receive equal treatment under the law, and citizenship is granted only to those with a Qatari father. According to The Guardian, 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since the World Cup bid was won.²⁸

These disparities highlight significant human rights issues. The exploitation of migrant workers is a systemic problem worsened by the kafala system. Addressing these issues is crucial for Qatar's long-term socio-economic stability and international standing. The Al Thani family has ruled Qatar since the mid-1800s, establishing an absolute monarchy. Revenues from fossil fuel reserves have transformed Qatar into one of the world's wealthiest countries. With the highest annual GDP per capita and virtually no unemployment among its citizens, Qatar provides free healthcare, education, and affordable housing for its citizens. Qatar's transformation from a British-protected emirate to a modern, independent state has been marked by rapid development and significant economic growth. However, the reliance on a vast migrant workforce has led to ongoing human rights concerns, particularly regarding labor conditions and the lack of rights for non-citizens. Not only does the Qatari government benefit from migrant workers, but companies, individual sponsors, and agencies also exploit these workers. The Aspire Zone Foundation awarded the largest contract for Khalifa Stadium's construction to Midmac and Six Construct JV, which subcontracted to firms like Eversendai Qatar, known for committing human rights abuses by confiscating workers' passports.

International organizations like the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have reported large-scale labor abuses in the construction sector. International media, human rights organizations, and the UN have pressured Qatar to reform and eventually abolish the kafala system, though critics still label Qatar's efforts as sportswashing.²⁹ Western media also focus on the treatment of women in Qatar. Reports discuss the male guardianship system, which varies in enforcement based on each family's conservatism level, likening the system to "being underage for life." Migrant women face intensified challenges, including violence and gender-based harassment in some World Cup partner hotels.³⁰ Mahmood,³¹ highlights issues faced by female university students in Qatar, including political reforms disadvantaging women, preferential treatment towards male students, and greater freedom for men to study abroad. Despite progress in education and employment for women, traditional norms and a patriarchal political

structure continue to limit gender equality, reflecting the complex interplay of historical and contemporary influences on human rights in Qatar.

International media

Qatar's Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, inaugurated the World Cup and celebrated "diversity" in a booth with hardly any women present. Rainbow armbands, symbolizing opposition to discrimination, faced prohibition despite initial approval. Introduced in 2020 by the Royal Dutch Football Association, these armbands were intended to protest Qatari laws criminalizing same-sex relationships. However, just hours before the tournament started, FIFA and the host nation banned their use, reflecting Qatar's conservative views as a Muslim country where homosexuality is illegal. This decision stirred controversy and highlighted the cultural clash. In a further contentious move, during his opening speech, FIFA President Gianni Infantino made a controversial statement, likening himself to being "gay," "female," and "migrant".³²

Media reports varied in their support for Muslim protests advocating democracy and rights. Celebrations by Moroccan migrants in Belgium turned into conflicts, and protests involving footballer Özil were criticized for exposing FIFA's double standards. Bild the German newspaper highlighted Germany's contradictory stance, criticizing the World Cup while engaging financially with Qatar.^{33,34} Despite Qatar's efforts in Soft Power investments, the desired effects in Western civil society were not achieved. The hashtag #sportswashing exposed inconsistencies and Western complicity in the football market. The New York Times reported on human rights abuses and the Kafala system, including a mural tribute to migrant workers removed by authorities.³⁵ Human rights topics covered by the media included the "One Love" rainbow armband campaign and Stéphanie Frappart's role as the first woman to referee a men's World Cup match. Despite some progress, women's equal rights in Qatar still lag significantly, as evidenced by the host country's female team's inactivity.^{36,37}

Publications also discussed the implications of Qatar's Islamic and Sharia-based political system, highlighting restrictions on alcohol sales. Despite controversies, the NYT and The Guardian concluded that Qatar achieved global recognition, especially with Lionel Messi winning his first world title.³⁸ Morocco's surprising journey in the championship prompted discussions on regional politics and the Palestinian cause. Fans expressed Arab solidarity, and the tournament provided a platform for cultural and political expressions.³⁹ Incidents such as Iranian players refusing to sing the national anthem highlighted the complex interplay of regional politics. Clashes between pro-government fans and protesters during Iran's World Cup match underscored domestic grievances spilling into the international arena.^{40,41} Newspapers also covered suspected corruption in the European Parliament involving officials connected to Qatar, revealing a "money-for-favors" scheme. The NYT saw the event as a stage for sports diplomacy, with global leaders negotiating and enhancing Qatar's reputation.⁴² Journalistic coverage revealed how Qatar's treatment of migrant workers might persist as a cultural trait. The media also highlighted local culture, exemplified by "ghutras" in team colors. Despite criticisms, Qatar achieved its goal of global recognition.^{41,42}

BBC journalist Shaimaa Khalil reported from Doha: It seems there are two parallel universes when it comes to the controversies surrounding this World Cup. For the proponents, activists, European

teams, and especially the seven captains intending to wear the One Love armband, this is an LGBT and human rights issue they wish to keep addressing. For host Qatar and the spectators who have come here or are watching around the Arab world — which has a predominantly Muslim majority — it is about religion, culture, regional norms, and above all, respect. To address the underlying issues that led to the decreased participation of European fans, future host countries and FIFA could consider implementing more robust measures to ensure the protection of human rights and inclusivity. FIFA has already taken steps in this direction for the 2026 World Cup, which will be held across Canada, Mexico, and the United States. The tournament is set to be the most inclusive and diverse in history, under the campaign “#WeAre26” which emphasizes unity, diversity, and inclusion. The campaign invites people, places, and communities to play a significant role in launching the brand of the 2026 World Cup, showcasing the unique stories and cultures of the host cities.⁴³

In contrast to his colleagues, João Felipe Gonçalves (2022) suggests that the criticisms of Qatar are blatant Islamophobia. By accusing an Arabic nation of using sports practices to clean its reputation [it is forgotten that] who, in fact, engages in a monumental “sportswashing” is western Europe, a region that gave the world football and less commendable things, such as colonialism, transatlantic slavery, fascism... and Islamophobia. The current crusade against Qatar has two roots: one medieval — European panic about the power of Islam — and another more recent — post-1945 Western Europe’s practice of concealing its own misdeeds by highlighting crimes in areas it dominated for centuries. Hamurabi Noufourri from Clarin (2022) highlights that Messi received the title of Sheikh (in Arabic, “shajj” meaning “respected elder or one chosen for qualities to lead their group”) through the “bisht” or “abaya.” This camel hair cloak and golden badge symbolize the authority given to men by their peers for their “Muruwa”: grit, effort, courage, and spirit of sacrifice, shown out of love for a group or individual to overcome injustices and adversities under the most challenging circumstances. Emir Tamim Al-Thani draping it on Messi with his own hands in front of the world indicates that he sees Messi as his equal in this “virtue.” It is an unforgettable supreme honor (“Sharaf”) among the Arabs.

However, it is important to recognize that the Islamic world is incredibly diverse, and interpretations of Islamic customs and laws vary widely across different cultures and regions. For instance, the significance and use of the “bisht” can differ significantly between Arab countries and other Muslim-majority regions such as Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa. This diversity reflects the complex tapestry of traditions, practices, and beliefs that exist within the global Muslim community. Acknowledging this diversity helps prevent oversimplification and reinforces the understanding that while certain symbols and practices, such as the “bisht,” hold particular meanings in some Arab cultures, they may not necessarily have the same connotations elsewhere in the Islamic world. Thus, Messi’s honor, while deeply meaningful within the specific context of Qatari and broader Arab traditions, should be viewed as one expression within a broader spectrum of Islamic cultural practices.

Conclusion

The article explored the context of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, focusing on Western journalistic discourses through the lenses of culture, political values, and international relations, delving into Soft Power, sports diplomacy, and sportswashing. Qatar’s use of sports positions it as an active participant in development programs,

enhancing geopolitics amid regional tensions. From a Western perspective, sportswashing aims to divert attention from issues like migrant rights, human rights abuses, gender disparities, and discriminatory legislation against LGBTQIA+ individuals. These criticisms highlight the complexities and contradictions in Qatar’s strategy. However, it’s crucial to acknowledge the diversity of opinions within Western media and scholarly communities.

Qatar’s strategic use of sports has positioned it as a significant player in international relations, demonstrating the power of Soft Power in shaping global perceptions. This strategy has allowed Qatar to project an image of modernization, progress, and openness. However, human rights abuses, migrant worker exploitation, and gender inequality remain critical concerns. The international scrutiny Qatar faced during the World Cup highlights the ongoing challenges it must address to achieve genuine and sustainable progress. These issues are not just moral imperatives but also crucial for Qatar’s long-term socio-economic stability and international standing.

A nuanced discussion must recognize the diversity within the Islamic world and the varying interpretations of Islamic customs and laws. The use of symbols like the “bisht” during the World Cup ceremonies reflects specific cultural practices within the Arab context but may differ significantly in other Muslim-majority regions. Acknowledging this diversity prevents oversimplification and reinforces the understanding of the complex tapestry of traditions, practices, and beliefs within the global Muslim community. While some Western media outlets and scholars view Qatar’s actions as sportswashing, others argue that Qatar’s investments in sports and efforts to modernize are legitimate attempts to engage with the global community and improve its international image. It is crucial to consider this spectrum of views to avoid generalizing the Western perspective and acknowledge the complex interplay of motivations and outcomes in Qatar’s use of sports diplomacy.

Qatar achieved its Soft Power goals through hosting international sporting events, investing in global sports, showcasing elite sports success, and engaging sports celebrities as diplomats. From the Western perspective, sportswashing diverts attention from significant issues, while from the Eastern perspective, it is seen as a tool for integration and promoting universal values in a post-colonial context. Although colonialism left a lasting impact, football has transcended these origins to become a universal language that fosters unity and equality. Therefore, the use of sports by Eastern countries to improve their global image can be seen as part of a more complex process of identity redefinition and the pursuit of global recognition, rather than merely a distraction from internal issues. The concept of sportswashing should be analyzed considering these contrasting perspectives: while the West may focus on the negative intentions and consequences, the East may view it as a tool for integration and the promotion of universal values in a post-colonial context. This duality of perspectives reveals the complexity of interpreting international actions, such as the organization of major sporting events, and the importance of historical and cultural contexts in global analyses.

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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