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Abdelmajid Lamsiah, Badr Bentalha

► **To cite this version:**

Abdelmajid Lamsiah, Badr Bentalha. 2022 Qatar World Cup: A Netnographic Analysis of the Relationship Between Sport, Media and Politic . *Réflexions sportives*, 2023, 1 (3), pp.69-95. <hal-04328791>

HAL Id: hal-04328791

<https://hal.science/hal-04328791v1>

Submitted on 7 Dec 2023

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2022 Qatar World Cup: A Netnographic Analysis of the Relationship Between Sport, Media and Politic

كأس العالم قطر 2022: تحليل نيتوغرافي للعلاقة بين الرياضة والإعلام والسياسة

Lamsiah Abdelamjid^{1,*},
Bentalha Badr²

¹ School of Humanities Sais, (Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University USMBA, Fez), (Morocco),

E-mail:
lamsiahmajid03@gmail.com

² National School of Business and Management, (Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University USMBA, Fez), (Morocco),

E-mail : bentalhabadr@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-1339-542X

Funding: The author declares that he has not received any funding for this article.

Conflict of interest: The author reports no conflict of interest.

To quote this article :

Lamsiah A. & Bentalha B., (2023) 2022 Qatar World Cup: A Netnographic Analysis of the Relationship Between Sport, Media and Politic. Réflexions Sportives , n°3, p. 69 - 95

Date of submission :02/05/2023

Date of acceptance : 30/09/2023

Date of publication:08/11/2023

Corresponding author :

Lamsiah Abdelamjid,
School of Humanities Sais, (Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University USMBA, Fez), (Morocco),
E-mail:
lamsiahmajid03@gmail.com

Abstract:

Sporting events have always been an opportunity to exhibit the power of sports to strengthen cultural relations, promote political interconnection, and consolidate social acceptance. The aim of this research is to understand why and how internet users engage differently with the proposal and acceptance of the hosting of a World Cup, namely Qatar 2022. An online netnographic survey was conducted to identify the perceptions of internet users on the organization of the Qatar 2022 World Cup.

Keywords: Sporting events; Social media; qualitative study; Sporting events; Qatar 2022 World Cup.

ملخص:

لطالما كانت الأحداث الرياضية فرصة لإظهار قوة الرياضة لتقوية العلاقات الثقافية ، وتعزيز الترابط السياسي ، وترسيخ القبول الاجتماعي. الهدف من هذا البحث هو فهم لماذا وكيف يتفاعل مستخدمو الإنترنت بشكل مختلف مع اقتراح وقبول استضافة كأس العالم ، وبالتحديد قطر 2022. تم إجراء مسح على الإنترنت لتحديد تصورات مستخدمي الإنترنت حول تنظيم كأس العالم قطر 2022.

كلمات مفتاحية: أحداث رياضية؛ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ دراسة نوعية؛ أحداث رياضية؛ كأس العالم قطر 2022.

With the growing conflictual tension all over the world, sport has been institutionalized as a diplomatic corps since it outstandingly stands as the most shared universal passion ever. Apart from being a phenomenon of connection, sporting events have always been an opportunity to showcase the power of sports to boost cultural relations, promote political hookups, and consolidate social dearness. Footballers, basket ballers, athletes, boxers and others have become the emblem of privileged figures with wide commercial ramification and political implications. The fact of liking international/foreign sporting figures forces the bridge towards identification which results in codifying new collective perceptions, generating brand shared emotions, and opening ways to resolve any political or societal conflict. Thus such a cosmopolitan perspective implies that sport “*plays a crucial role in shaping more inclusive collective identities and a cosmopolitan outlook open to complex allegiances*” (Markovits, 2010). By interfering with the process of mass mediation and information, sport increases the possibilities of connection, adaptation and influence for millions of people around the world. It also allows for great flexibility and fluidity of exchange and discussion. Currently, it is quite unimaginable to analyze and discuss sporting events without taking into account mass media patterns and social network discussions. This exploration of the content of perceptions and positions inherent in media coverage is significantly important for understanding the behavior of mass media end users when dealing with sports events. Sport is certainly a powerful medium for reaching out and building relationships. Globalization has profoundly changed the landscape of international relations and has allowed social networks to overlap with traditional ones. This act, largely supported by methodology, stimulates a great deal of awareness, responsibility and professionalism when it comes to reporting personal, professional and organizational views to the public. Ethnographic and netnographic insights into the interaction between sports, media and politics point to a renewed need to inspect the patterns of behavior embedded in a wide range of online databases.

The central question of our research is related to the relationship between sport, media and politics. The aim is to investigate the various comments and opinions of Internet users in order to understand the intersections between the research variables. Our study target is the submission and the hosting of the 2022 World Cup by Qatar. Indeed, the media widely discussed Qatar's bid and the preparations of the organizers after being awarded the 2022 World Cup. Are the comments on sporting videos politically driven? To what extent do digital comments vary in content and discourse within the two temporal axes: before and after the

announcement of the FIFA? Is the collective consciousness of internet users aimed at a sporting analysis of the event or camouflaged by the presence of a political and diplomatic trend?

In order to answer the problematic proposed for our reflection, we will first study the approach and the possible interrelations between sport, politics and the media by showing the inter-connection of the two spheres. Then, we will talk about our netnographic methodological approach and the possibilities offered by this method to discuss the issues of interference of the political logic into sporting events. Finally, we will support our reflection with the results obtained from our qualitative netnographic study in order to show the different conceptualizations and attitudes.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Sport: Impact and Vulnerability

1.1.1. Sport and Politics

Keeping politics out of sport draws the implicit negative connotation of the undesirable fusion between politics and sport (Darnell et al., 2019). However, it seems impossible to keep politics away from sport since every sporting event definitely starts with playing the contenders' national anthem, which is incontestably the symbol of a country, a nation, and a community (Thorson & Serazio, 2018). That is to say the involvement of politics in the course of sporting events is actually unavoidable. The soft power inbred in the combination between the feeling of belonging and identification establishes the ground for a national identity and thus fosters a certain political significance (Ogunnubi, 2019; Grix et al., 2019; Lamsiah & Bentalha, 2023). Paddik (2019) plainly stated this fact when he revealed that "*the United States was the first country to advertise itself through its victories in the modern political sport system*". Putting the spotlight on the extension of politics on sport, most, if not all, countries attach the concept of loss and victory to political dignity and prestigious sovereignty. Paddik (2019) again labeled cosmopolitan transformation of sporting figures as "the bridging capital", which results in codifying new collective perceptions, generating brand shared emotions, and opening ways to resolve any political or societal conflict.

Sport undeniably occupies a tremendous place in people's daily lives and evolves to be a formidable integral part in the intellectual, cultural and social landscape of modern societies nowadays. That billions of spectators watch sporting events all over the world covering

various games boosts the influential position international sporting organizations may hold. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA), among others, enjoy a prestigious status which exceeds the usual entertaining capital to a more commercial and political importance.

Sport is conventionally regarded as an aspect of the international system since it “*is now a mirror in which nations..... see themselves..... This metaphorical mirror is a source of exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, association and disassociation*” (Mangan, 1999). Such a “*beyond the game*” features of sport has enhanced its position vis-à-vis international relations and diplomacy in particular as it teems with the power to reinforce sustainability, elevate development and lessen alienation (Dichter, 2021; Lamsiah & Bentalha, 2022). The pertinent rationale explaining the probation at this intricate crossroad is the “*rise in the importance of soft power, the power to persuade and attract, as a major development in international relations since the end of the Cold War*” (Pigman & Rofe, 2014). Power is undeniably a pivotal approach in international relations for Realists and Neorealists, considering it as a decisive factor in dominating armed conflicts and an effective mechanism in establishing supremacy and influence (Trunkos & Heere, 2017).

1.1.2. Sport and Public Diplomacy

Nye (2004) viewed power differently and detached soft power from its hard counterpart and highlighted the tremendous role that soft power plays in setting up an open and collaborative ground for better interrelations. In this regard, the rise of soft power in international relations has brought about revision in the practices of sport, forcing it to employ sporting events as a persuasive and effective tool to fulfill foreign policy ends.

Beijing 2008 is an outstanding example of this perspective whereby China exploited the Olympic Games to change its foreign policy’s image and introduced itself as a growing and modern country full of ambitious desire for genuine transparency and compromising collaboration. Former FIFA president Joseph Blatter keenly articulated the same viewpoint and highlighted that FIFA “*has now taken on a social, cultural, political and sporting dimension.....[and]....has also become a powerful economic phenomenon... Football can move mountains*”. Such a statement from the mouth of a pioneer in the field proves that sport

has crafted a strong posture in humans' modern life, and then positioned itself as a powerful tool in all fields, especially in the diplomatic sphere (Lamsiah et al., 2021).

Murray & Pigman (2013) have meticulously mapped the close relationship between international sport and diplomacy, and distinguished between two forms whereby governments employ sport as a diplomatic tool (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Diplomacy “through” sport is the first form. The outstanding example that strongly explains the mechanisms of such diplomacy is the incident of ‘Ping-Pong’ matches between USA and China in the 70s, which triggered positive interactions and formal negotiations. Notably, governments consciously deploy sport providing all the necessary logistics to rebrand the state’s image and inculcate in the minds of the foreign publics the nation’s positive values and likeable conceptions. The second form is performed when sportspeople act “within” sport, carrying out their governments’ representation on diplomatic grounds. The purpose is mainly to construct an agreeable state’s image, characterized by the delivery of positive messages and values such as mutual respect, tolerance, compassion, discipline, equality of opportunity, and the rule of law (Murray, 2011).

The inherent power in sporting events lies in their being more desirable and entertaining than official meetings and diplomatic encounters, where “*many heads of state often use the opportunity to engage other parties in unofficial discussions about issues*” (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Sportsmen and sportswomen, by the same token, have been chosen by the United Nations “*to build international relationships and [has] structured ambassador programs in which many athletes participate: Muhammed Ali, Carl Lewis, Maria Sharapova, Marta, Didier Drogba, and the list goes on*” (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). These “public” ambassadors are going to be fully integrated in the planning and management of the refreshment of new starts with opponent countries providing an operational support of human and cultural awareness.

The most dependable characteristic of sport as a soft power accessory is that it is widely accepted and predominantly germane; it fundamentally enjoys a great potential of influence particularly in a non-coercive manner as Nye (2004) highlighted it when he admitted that the ultimate goal of soft power is to make the other wants the same things one wants. Values such as compassion, understanding, respect, and tolerance are hard-to-measure and then their implications are hardly observable (Chen, 2018). For the given context, sport organisations invest significant time and resources on social media because of its popularity to boost

connection and recognition online. Considerable resources are invested to control social media and employ it as a tool in their marketing strategy.

1.2. Sport, Media and Digitalization

In the wake of globalization, sport experienced tremendous changes through the processes and the economies of media industries, which affected the regulation of media policies (Boulianne, 2020). The growing visibility of global sport as a promotional tool has been fully settled with digital broadcasting that “*signalled a new phase in the evolution of the relationship between sport and the media*” (Boyle, 2009). Interacting with the mediating process, sport enhances the possibilities of connection, adaptation, and influence for millions of people across the globe, allowing flexibility to circulate among the most incompatible states (Wenner, 2021). Nowadays, it is quite unconceivable to analyze sporting events without taking into account the mass media patterns, a relationship that is characterized by complementarity and conflict (Goldlust, 2018; Abeza et al., 2019). Media discourse, namely electronic media, has entered the center stage of sporting activities and become important in the entertaining process (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019). Media actors constantly try to become visible in the sporting field by way of a good media practice and a great deal of objectivity. This notion of objectivity seems really hard to reach since media means are not immune from influence, namely the level of freedom that differs from country to country.

Media content plays a very important part in the methodology of analyzing large volumes of political and social comments to stand on the different opinions of the audience related to the issue in question (Hutchins et al., 2019). The World Wide Web is the most relevant content for the study due to its inexhaustible capacity of memory which encompasses a huge range of access to information. The Internet has been anything but a swift global transmission of information and a colossal source of data, so it is well suited to a pluralistic discourse seen as necessary in a more competitive world. In this sense, talking about the “sporticization” of digital media implies the evolutionary trend towards a digital representation of a new age (Lebel et al., 2019). Likewise, the “sporticization” of the human existence entails an understanding of the nature of the sport activity. On the basis of this statement, the essence of sport lies in the following definition given by former United States Ambassador to Denmark, Jim Cain H.E., at the 2nd Hague Conference about Diplomacy in 2009: “*Sports can be a powerful medium to reach out and build relationships...across cultural and ethnic divides, with a positive message of shared values: values such as mutual*

respect, tolerance, compassion, discipline, equality of opportunity and the rule of law. In many ways, sports can be a more effective foreign policy resource than the carrot or the stick” (Murray, 2011).

Digitalization has thoroughly reshaped the landscape of international relationships and then enabled social networks to overlap traditional ones. The development of the communication segment has known its ultimate blooming over, and the dimensions of time and space are no more of the same importance since things are viewed differently. No one can deny the fact that, due to globalization, the supremacy of military power has turned old-fashioned and the preoccupation with “rebranding” has started gaining ground (Melissen, 2005). The image of a country has internationally gained centrality and thus started to legitimize the ability to promote interrelations, build trust and boost mutual interests since “nations don’t have friends, they only have permanent interests” (Melissen, 2005). Under such condition, governments are paying more attention to the inclinations of the public because social awareness has reached its climax thanks to digital globalization (Connell, 2018). Thus the changes in the digitalized world have increased the breadth and the allure of sport institutions. On the same wavelength, sport is undoubtedly a smooth vehicle of reconciliation and integration between countries engulfed in hatred and antagonism (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2019; Doidge et al., 2020). Due to the permeation of digitalization in the daily lives of people, social media ushered in a new social and cultural revolutionary era. The phenomenon of social media has significantly changed the degree of (online) involvement and increasingly leveraged the level of interpersonal connections. The gratification has reached its highpoint in the context of social media use since audiences contently met their needs and desires (Dunne et al., 2010). With the speeded up pace of digitalization, the power of social media evolved to become a major engagement platform leveraging the degree of interactivity and involvement.

Driven by the needs of interactivity, collaboration and co-creation (Shilbury et al., 2014) social media emerged to fulfill this task. Filo et al. (2015) state that new media technologies “*allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies, media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes and journalists)*” (Filo et al., 2015). The significance of social media platforms is illustrated by its key role in conveying specific content and how such specific content is understood, interpreted, and manipulated by users keeping that way a

great deal of interactivity and exchange. Most importantly, a certain degree of psychological engagement is inherent in the exchanging process on social media platforms (Brodie et al., 2013).

2. Methodology: Netnography, Foundations and Approach

2.1. Netnography: A Digital Ethnographic Method

The most preeminent feature of the web is that it has allowed internet users to express themselves freely (Momen, 2020). The fascinating potential of internet has been its tremendous impact on research, enabling people to participate in forums, podcasts, social networking sites, videos, blogs, newsgroups, photo sharing communities, and virtual worlds (Bowler, 2010). Kozinets (2015) defines netnography as “*a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of data collected and participant observational research conducted originates in and manifested through that data shared freely on the Internet, including mobile applications*”. Moreover, netnography may be defined as “*ethnography applied to the Internet*” (Alla et al., 2019). This initially qualitative method adapts ethnographic research techniques to online communications (Mercanti-Guérin, 2009). Overlooking initial practicalities, netnography helps analyzing the communicative acts of the users who are members of virtual communities, by trying to give them a meaning. The internet and ethnography are jointly constructing the pillars of such methodology of analysis (Bentalha & Hmioui, 2022).

Netnography emerged in the United States in the 1990s when the Internet was still in its infancy (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). It involves the researcher’s complicity in the group for a better understanding of the subject studied. Definitely, the researcher learns the language used by integrating the community, and thus discovers their vision as well as the meanings given to the attitudes or behaviors communicated (Sayarh, 2013). The netnographic approach can be used for not only a small amount of data, where the researcher can focus on the research topic but to big data as well, as in large datasets and incorporate computer analysis and visualization tools. The netnography approach mainly focuses on the topic that concerns the participants, the group and the social network site by utilizing the research hypothesis (Del Vecchio et al., 2020). There are four types of approaches to netnography: symbolic netnography, digital netnography, auto-netnography, and humanistic netnography (Kozinets, 2015; AlDajani, 2020).

1. Symbolic netnography: represents the online social experiences and interactions of a particular group, nations, language, cultures, and identity formations.
2. Digital netnography: deals with the use of computer-assisted software for research methods to collect online data, gather participant observations, and conduct qualitative data interpretations.
3. Autonetnography: a quantitative and qualitative behavioral study. It focuses on autobiographical aspects, for one's own identity and history, personal reflections on participation in social networks, with a critical understanding (Morais et al., 2020).
4. Humanistic netnography includes all data, such as visual interactions of online visualizations, video visualizations and interpretations.

2.2. Netnography: A Structured Approach

In order to achieve a deep, comprehensive, and detailed understanding of a group of people, community, or society, the netnographic approach must be structured according to the procedures outlined by Kozinets (Fig. 1). The approach under consideration consists first in preparing the research by planning the fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010), where the researcher must define a clear and precise problematic. An identification of the virtual community to the object of study should be established by structuring and contextualizing the phenomenon being studied (Rabahi, 2020).

Figure N°1: Simplified procedure for a netnographic research project



Reference: The Authors

Preparing the research by planning the fieldwork is very instrumental to the netnographic process (Kozinets, 2010) whereby the researcher must define a clear and precise

problematic in order to facilitate the identification of the virtual community corresponding to the netnographer's object of study. As a matter of fact, the netnographer must ensure that he retrieves as much information as possible about the participants in the virtual community using various research tools available, until he becomes an expert and a full member (Kozinets, 2002). It is primordial to try to describe, as precisely as possible, the structure and context of the phenomenon under study. The second step is to gather information about the communities and their cultures (Kozinets, 2010). The contextualization of data owns the lion's share in the analysis. This contextualization can be difficult due to the limited personal information available on the Web (Kozinets, 2002).

As for the third step, the researcher must begin the analysis of the messages, texts, publications and online postings, after having established the classification of the information collected in order to manage the large amount of electronic data. It is also noted that it would be more reasonable in this process not to stop collecting data as long as community members continue to generate new discussions, new ideas and new ways of understanding the problem (Syarh, 2013). The researcher must present the results of the research (Kozinets, 2010), and eventually share his research results with participants who are members of the community studied, both to solicit their reactions to these results and to be transparent with them. Throughout the process, netnographic research remains marked by the effective participation of the researcher in the virtual space, who, whether his immersion is partial or complete, cannot be detached from his object of study (Rabahi, 2020).

2.3. Netnography, a Method in Search of Efficiency

The advantage of using this method is that the researcher is in the position of an observer who does not influence the participant. Simply monitoring online communities via netnographic observation techniques could be considered a faster and more cost-effective research method. Due to these strengths, netnography is increasingly being used by researchers in various fields (Jong, 2017). This is evident in research conducted by Bengry-Howel et al. (2011), who found 1,300 netnographic search results in a systematic Google Scholar search. One of the main advantages of netnography is the ability to expand the geographic scope of the search, connect globally dispersed networks, and increase the researcher's accessibility to the population under study (Addeo et al., 2019). This is particularly useful for hard-to-reach groups and sensitive research topics such as illegal acts, diseases, health concerns and interests, stigmatized phenomena and groups (migrants,

disabled, etc.). The main drawbacks of netnography are the lack of control over the sampling structure of the study population, as well as the lack of a questionnaire, interview schedule, observation plan, or any research structure or strategy for data collection (Prior & Miller, 2012). These drawbacks could introduce some source of bias into the results, which could be especially critical when attempting to generalize the results to the larger population. Another critical aspect of netnography relies on the inability to capture the range of offline interactions between community members, allowing for dissonance between online and offline representations of respondents (Morais et al., 2020).

3. Survey Design: Objectives, Field and Research Methods

The central question of our research tackles the relationship between sport, media and politics. Our study target is the submission and the hosting of the 2022 World Cup by Qatar. Indeed, the media widely discussed Qatar's bid and the preparations undertaken by the organizing committee. Are the comments on sporting videos politically driven? To what extent do digital comments vary in content and discourse within the two temporal axes: before and after the announcement of the FIFA? Is the collective consciousness of internet users aimed at a sporting analysis of the event or camouflaged by the presence of a political and diplomatic trend?

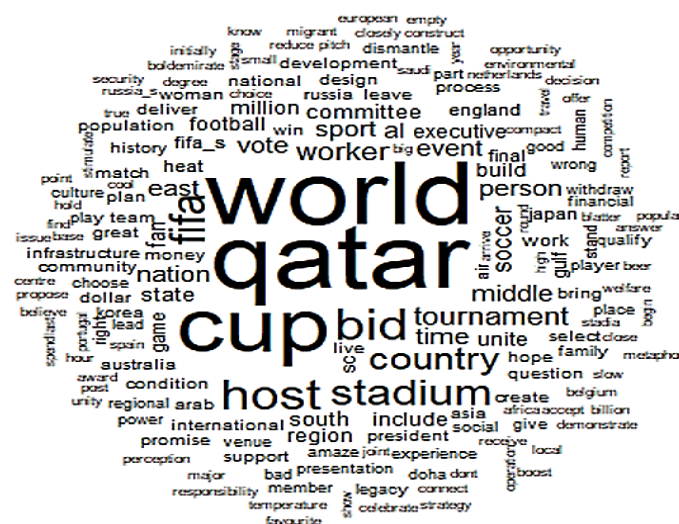
In our study, the netnographic method was applied as a data collection method since citizens increasingly access online communities to obtain objective information (Kozinets, 2015). The representative online communities in our study appear to be Internet users using YouTube channels. Digital discussants have reported on both Qatar's bid to host the 2022 World Cup and its conduct of the project. Each online community contains a multitude of comments and allows the analysis of the various opinions. Our methodological choice for netnography is justified by the specificity of the adopted research question. Once the online community has been identified and located, we will analyse the opinions and comments posted on such platforms, in accordance with the research question. The first step consists in downloading all the comments from several accounts related to the research. In a second step, the researchers perform a duplicate coding of the corpus in order to group the messages by theme. The objective is to perform a contextualized analysis of the different exchanges between members of the virtual community.

In order to avoid bias, comments were not selected on the basis of their content, but rather through random sampling in each online community and year. The temporal axes covered six months on both intervals -before and after- to the announcement of the Qatar's win. Once the key phrases articulating opinions and experiences were extracted from the comments for qualitative analysis, the meanings of each phrase were summarized into meaningful words, which were then used as variables for future numerical analysis and discussion. Most importantly, the analysis of the 542 opinions, all in English, allowed us to deduce the important opinions and comments related to our topic of study. The reviews were statistically processed using the IRAMUTEQ software.

4. Results

It goes without saying that whenever we talk about the online communication process, language is inherently involved. The use of language is primordial to achieve a free interaction of individuals, to enable them to exchange opinions, and to express their inner thoughts. YouTube proves to be an outstanding earmark of such activities, through which nothing is brushed off. It grows clearer that the comments on the videos, taken as a sample, are driven by political thoughts; the evolving link between language (comments) and political thoughts gets closer and stronger. The viewpoints expressed bellow in the word cloud of comments on the videos highlighting the candidacy of Qatar to host the World Cup 2022 translate the formation of some discursive practices encompassing Qatar's national interest, social development policy, and immigration policy issues (Fig. 2).

Figure N° 2: Word cloud of comments about Qatar candidacy



Reference: Statistical study

Accordingly, users' comments retain a highly strategic part in displaying either a positive or a negative image of the host country. Such comments undoubtedly criticize the state's national policy choices and find faults in its national governing. The predominance of the political thought process is unavoidable in nearly most of the comments with the prevalence of two concepts: host country and tournament.

4.1. The Host Country

Facts show, in a very expressive way, that the digital public opinion, during Qatar's candidacy, is intended for keeping tight connections with Qatar's geostrategic plans, which pragmatically implies a focus on specific political choices first, and advance national interest in terms of gaining more power and security. The media discourse transmitted via the official site, i.e. YouTube is de facto a digital tool that promotes the construction of reciprocal communication, simply to abstain from breaching certain obligations undertaken by the state to establish a cognitive involvement with potential web visitors.

Most participants were critical about the illicit practices that Qatar may use:

- *“Qatar’ll illicitly employ its financial muscle to win the right to host the 2022 WC!!”*
- *“Just to stop giving money to those guys who think everything has a price and don't care about the planet!”*

The religious and cultural specificities of Qatar are present in the comments through words such as shame, illicit, culture and Islam. The allegations to bribery regularly cut across the comments explored so far illustrating the belief that money had been a very serious revelator in the choice of the host country, Qatar. The consolidation of such hypothesis had been grounded, to a big part, on the bottom-up influence that the rich country exerted to win priority when it comes to strategic decisions. Qatar was said to be a state-centric model, along with other oil-rich countries, starting to reconsider the necessity to adapt with the changing fabric in positioning itself in the global arena.

- *“Bloody hell!! What's this? Qatar is the wealthiest state, she wants to rule the world.....yukky!!!!”*

The feeling of belonging to a community is a focal point in settling a joint consent because *“while not necessarily sharing common geographic space, nevertheless*

(commentators) act together for common goals” (Ojha et al., 2016). As a matter of fact, there is nothing new or extraordinary in stressing the fact that most of the commentators moulded comments and, more emphatically, attacks in a politically-driven attitude. The so-called “common goal” seems to be more and more individualized with a diminishing impact in public debates, with negligible power of suggestion and advice when it comes to questioning Qatar’s capacity to host World Cup 2022. For the given context, the virtual judges instrumentally positioned themselves anywhere but at the collective consent that Qatar’s social atmosphere was entirely incompatible with the soul of the World Cup and its supreme principles of the freedom of thought and the promotion of consensus.

The migrant workforce had a growing visibility in the course of the comments instead of focusing on the sport play in the battle to host the 2022 World Cup. Specifically, Qatar is actually one of the wealthiest countries in the world but depends on a huge number of immigrants, which explains the reason behind focusing on the possible mistreatment that workers will undergo. Building on the potential of bribery to human rights, comments tried to draw attention to the disastrous situation immigrants would live in, i.e. heat, squalid camps, and passports confiscated, once the 2022 World Cup is hosted by Qatar.

- *“thanks to the **bad working conditions**, they aren't paid enough and they can't leave the country because their **passports are taken**”*

4.2. Tournament

The impact of the climate can bring decline to any competition. In this sense, the flow of comments stressed Qatar’s intense summer temperature is suffocating, and insisted on the very notion of players’ freshness during the tournament. Many voices arose to attract the attention to the disaster that would happen while the toing and froing of visitors and spectators between stadiums and hotels via metros in the unbearable temperature would be a catastrophe. All the interveners agreed on the fact that pleasure would be lost with such an unfavorable tournament setting:

- *“What about the **temperature** there 45°- 50° C so **hot** !!! I hope the Qatar people can manage with that It's going to be the **weirdest World Cup** ever.”*

Nearly all opinions presumed that heat will be the normative standard in not choosing Qatar to host the World Cup 2022. By focusing only on stadiums does not do justice to the complexity of the situation with the huge number of fans that will invade the small country.

A significant line-up of comments played up the ugly fact that Qatar had neither stadiums nor infrastructure to host the event. Qatari officials would be forthwith obliged to start from scratch, which is ironically surrealistic. This most certainly required a better understanding of the concept of governance in the vital fields such administration, tourism, and social affairs. It was argued that because there was no good governance in Qatar and no effective political conditionality, the process of engagement in promoting sports as an emblem of the country's openness and triumphalism is a resounding failure. In this respect, commentators suspiciously considered the good intent of Qatar's candidacy to host the World Cup 2022.

In so doing, Qatar is consolidating its political orientation which will be crowned by the winning the organization of the World Cup regarded. Many were assuming that such a victory would be tremendously incentive in the regional context, taking into account that Qatar became so sensitive to adapt to the international game and strived to diversify its soft power repertoire, i.e. starting with media (Aljazeera channel) ending with sports (World Cup), to gain a comfortable position in the international relations challenges.

- *“Qatar is going to break the stadiums down and **donate** them to **underprivileged countries** including the technology found in them (the air-conditioning for example) They said that the stadiums would all be dismantled after the world cup and the bricks and so on would be given out to schools and stuff.”*

At this stage, we will move to discuss comments after the declaration of the FIFA. As presented below, the verbatim is fundamentally consolidating the victory of Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup (Fig. 3).

called “wrong practices” normalizing traditional forms of narrow intuitional logic embodied in the lack of freedom in different fields:

- *“I think it's **not possible** to host a world cup in a country where is almost **no press freedom, freedom of speech**, where **rights** for women are very **limited** ... we are living in the 21st century!!!”*

The variety of comments is key factor in building up links with participants. Bridging social capital leads to interaction and getting to read, understand and respond to others through online platforms. The sense of place attachment is not felt through interventions as has been expressed in the quote above that overlooked the digital place making.

The issue of migrant workers cannot be withdrawn from the particular context in which it exists. The projection of poverty as a direct reason that pushed immigrants to join Qatar, according to a participant, hinged significantly not on Qatar’s ability to stage major competitions with the help of external workforce, but on the high international profile it started to adopt, alongside a foreign policy featured with conspicuous pragmatism:

- *“Armed, uniformed and trained in Qatar and sent to fight in poor countries. There is no democracy in Qatar. **Workers are slaves** that are worked to death.”*

The extensive use of words such as shame, blood, sad, bad, refuse, boycott, fall, helpless, etc., implies a constructive involvement in the promotion of what seems a rebellious discourse. Such a negative orientation towards disregarding Qatar hosting the World Cup 2022 frames the commentators’ position within a hostile context whereby their behavior’s interpretation makes sense, and confers legitimacy on the standpoints they are expressing. A post among others says:

- *“Will the **women** be allowed to walk the streets on their own or **without veils**? Can you **drink in public**? Can you **kiss or hold hands** with your partner without being thrown in jail? It's a disaster waiting to happen.”*

It is quite reasonably arguable to wonder whether such a prestigious tournament should be held in a country that does not respect others’ cultures and lifestyles. Qatar is unquestionably considering hosting the 2022 World Cup a key ingredient to reinforce its

positioning as a legitimate actor on the world stage. In this connection, an intervener came to lessen the fears underlying that time would give some space to the host country to address those, at least, theoretical issues in a manner that coexists with external values and norms.

- *“I don’t even know why even people hate qatar or they being jealous about qatar like every country qatar also deserves world cup, being an outsider working in there; i like qatar. qatar is changing **give them some time**. only naked girls near the beach or disco, clubs everywhere make the country developed develop your own mind first :)”*

Based on the comparison between before and after data gathered, the study found that the dominant motivation in the commentary process was strictly political. Evidently, the intention of online discussants had been interlocked between sport and politics. There was a driving force in commentators to derive from the shackles of reality and surf on online virtual space to share their feelings and opinions.

5. Discussion

This study shows how social media plays a deciding role in conveying standpoints, expressing resentment, and developing on others’ opinions. Media surely allows more scope for users to verbalize their inner thoughts, then translate their concerns, and, in the end, express themselves freely and purposefully. Social media overtly provides an interesting site for evincing societal values reinforced by implicit interest scrambles. The boundary between satisfaction and hatred quintessentially loses visibility when it cuts across the debates explored. And that is exactly what happened with the Beijing's 2022 Winter Olympics torch that was extinguished and its bearer was forced to flee away in both Paris and London because of the anger over the treatment of Tibetans, and the allegations of "genocide" against Uyghurs in Xinjiang (CNN, 2021). The calls to boycott Beijing's Winter Olympics on social media had led the Protestants to become troublesomely influential in causing serious embarrassment to China in many parts of the world. A case in point, social media users broke down the virtual modality and switched to real-life power holders.

The comparison between the before and after standpoints of commentators, indicating that the greater the dissatisfaction among participants before the announcement, the more frequent the improvements that were made to postoperative care (Table 1).

Table N°1: Sample of key words frequency through temporal axes of 2022 Qatar's WC

Key words before December 2010		Key words after December 2010	
World cup	137	World cup	112
Qatar	76	Qatar	86
host	31	Worker	77
FIFA	28	Stadium	31
stadium	26	Football	23
worker	15	FIFA	23
tournament	15	Money	23
vote	12	Right	22
sport	11	Host	11

Reference: Statistical study

When exploring the content of perceptions and standpoints inherent in online commentary, we note that the behavior of participants is significantly telling in understanding the interference of political systems and societal mechanisms on digital production. The interaction of digital media users with the sporting event goes beyond the possibilities of connection and adaptation to fueling the feelings of antagonism and brushoff. The comments related to labor (workers) have drastically tripled bringing about fundamental change in users' perceptions and behavior. Labor was devoted a little attention in the first part of the commentary process since it is a common conception in the Gulf countries. However, the level of engagement has known its peak once Qatar won the World cup hosting and consequently generated a “*stimulus*” (Muntinga et al., 2011) for further involvement in the comments ranging from partial indifference to an in-depth concern with the issue of workers. It is important to mention that most casualties were Nepalese and that lies “*in a preference for Asian workers deemed less expensive and more flexible in work, as well as less politically*” (Essomba, 2017). It is a well-nigh fact to consider the impact of politics on sports as opinions are constructed on digital platforms through the subtle evoking of issues related to the field of political logic more than to the basic issue, sports.

According to the study, digital criticism about the event award process is divided to cover two lapses of time. The first covers the period prior to the declaration of the host winner, and the second deals with the period after declaring Qatar as the official host. The aim of the study is to spot the orientation of the commentary narrative before and after the 10th December, 2010. As a matter of fact, the results show that the main orientation is purely political hovering around a number of socio-political issues in the Qatari society.

The preeminent feature of the commentary orientation in the first empirical part is that Qatar is an unfit host country for a huge event such as the World Cup 2022. They argue that Qatar seems to be mobilizing a fierce campaign to hosting of the 2022 World Cup using unethical means. More trenchant and sustained criticism addressed the bribery issue and the attempt of Qatar to use its wealth as a soft approach to seduce minds behind the closed doors of FIFA’s offices. These allegations were grounded on the very fact that Qatar employed “*its financial muscle to win the right to host the 2022 World Cup has earned it a conviction in the court of public opinion even if revelations of alleged bribery have yet to produce a smoking gun*” (Dorsey, 2014). The use of “money”, cited 23 times after the win of Qatar (Table 1), is an integral political shift. The negligible use of the word “money” in the first interval and its sudden emergence in the second half connotes a political ‘behavioural construct’ (Muntinga et al., 2011) that colored the commentary framework with new behavioral-related content.

“Rights” (cited 22 times only in the second temporal axe (Table 1)) is another concept that is built on the assumption that Qatar’s social atmosphere is entirely incompatible with the soul of the World Cup. Commentators advocate the deep-seated distrust of Qatari social governance, which failed to stand against the prevailing impression of the abominable living and working conditions of foreign workers in the Gulf state. Most of the comments pointed out the calamitous situation immigrant workers will find themselves in once the 2022 World Cup is attributed to Qatar, i.e. heat, squalid camps, and passports confiscated. Such collective consciousness is channeled through a set of shared opinions and moral attitudes. The comments posted operated as a driving force to reflect the dreary social status of immigrant laborers urging FIFA to stop these abusive practices at least by declining Qatar’s candidacy.

A user-generated content that tackled issues quite linked to sport are those of infrastructures and climate. The fact that Qatar is a young country massively lacking the infrastructure and amenities to handle a mega event such the World Cup (Griffin, 2019) did not stop the commentators from sarcastically pointing out the failure of Qatari sports governance through a significant political perspective. Overshadowed by oil-rich countries, Qatar has adventured in a pivotal manoeuvre towards demonstrating the effectiveness of its multi-level governance, yet still missed, according to the comments, the promotion of sport which no longer exists in the margins of national interest. The digital attacks were basically targeting the major gap in the Qatari political conditionality that needs to be addressed before presenting candidacy to handle a tournament of such magnitude. With this perspective in

mind, the collective consciousness strikes again to criticize the Qatari institutional logic prevailing that favors the modality of exceeding traditional boundaries in solving intricate international issues instead of promoting national power.

On 2nd December 2010 when FIFA's Sepp Blatter announced Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup, the feeling of anxiety about the social status of immigrant workers in Qatar gets intense even if the practice is not new and years before it started to "*become more commonplace*" (Amara, 2005). There is no novelty in saying that Qatar is so far striving to establish a positive image of a country that is able to organize the most prestigious tournament, and adopt a discourse characterized by the soundness and power of its words. The intensity of hatred directed to Qatar as a government translates a certain degree of psychological engagement (Brodie et al., 2013). Findings strongly suggest that those who commented consistently evinced a great deal of compassion and sympathy with the hardship which immigrant workers have been withstanding. It is actually axiomatic that the system of social governance should be in shape so that Qatar, as an ambitious country, can have the stamina to effectively market its interests overseas.

It has been noted that the content-shared moved to address more socio-cultural issues, namely alcohol and sexual activities (Mattar, 2020). They argue on that Qatar has a strict anti-gay rules and drinking beer in public is strictly forbidden disregarding Qatar's claim that is has more liberal policies in comparison with its neighbors. However, sport has always been in the heart of Qatari domestic affairs from the late 1990s since it is considered as a key safety-valve for national sentiments and social security and as a critical part to regularize within the global community. Over the past 20 years, the Qatari sporting calendar focused on the increasing tendency towards a realistic approach that established a strong government-sport network to forge an auspicious image of a country capable of hosting sporting events. Things said and done, Qatar organized the Asian Games in 2006, the World Handball Championships in 2015 and the World Cycling Championships in 2016. Yet, all these competitions do not reach the caliber of the World Cup in terms of scope and global magnitude.

It is true that the lexicon of expression channeled through the digital platform translates a total dissatisfaction of commentators about the so-called 'irresponsible' behaviors of Qatari officials, and conveys indeed the inability of the country to host a mega event such as the World Cup. It is worth mentioning that no single opinion drew a comparison with other famous oil-rich contenders. To provide a rational analysis to the Qatari context within its

regional realm, the Gulf House for Studies, which published its 2nd edition in September 2021 of The Political Participation Index in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (PPIGCC), is chosen as an illustrative example (Gulf House, 2021). The feedback of the index, which used ten scales, set the disappointing outcome concerning Gulf countries' internal experiences related to democracy, political participation, and the right to political action. There seems to be pertinent issues to focus on to compare Qatar to some other Gulf countries monitored by the index to stand on intersections and discrepancies. Our reference to the Index is two-fold: to get a clear insight into the weaknesses and strengths of each Gulf state, and to stand on the effectiveness or the impotence of the political systems and the social conditions in the six countries. It ultimately looks like that Qatar is no exception.

Conclusion

This study identified the gaps in the thinking process of internet users when dealing with Qatar candidacy to host the 2022 World cup, exploring the thin thread between sporting interest and political conviction in the digital platform. The visibility aspect of the political logic meddling in the sport field was demonstrated, exclusively, through two main instances: the issue of labor conditions in the Gulf state and infrastructure.

Labor conditions in the Gulf state constituted a vital element in the dynamics of comments whereby a neat connection between politics and sport immediately mapped the digital platform. The concept of laborers was three times as many words used in the first temporal axe which stresses the political conception in arguing about Qatar's candidacy to host the World Cup. In this connection, the new geo-political positioning of Qatar in the global arena is a total misfit, according to the discussants, since the engagement of the oil-rich country cannot be fulfilled unless they get the issue of migrants workforce sorted out.

The perception of commentators of the labor conditions especially in the second temporal axe is driven by political discursive elements mainly characterized by the use of negatively connoted words such as heat, squalid camps, and passports confiscated. Such situational context touches upon the real image Qatar as one of the wealthiest countries in the world wants to give. The death of numerous migrant workers (Duval, 2021) in the fulfillment of the Qatari building program which includes seven stadiums, a new airport, a new city, and other major projects among which transportation systems: roads, public transport, and an airport explains the reason behind focusing on the objectionable mistreatment that workers.

Accordingly, the recurrence of the issue of infrastructure in comments is noteworthy, given that Qatar is among the wealthiest Gulf countries. Discussants repeatedly queried how it might be reasonable that Qatar had no suitable infrastructure, which increased the amount of doubtfulness about the effectiveness of its national policy. It is unmistakably proactive attitude to boost the development and implementation of a strong infrastructure not only for the sake of hosting a prestigious competition but for the welfare of Qatari citizens and the leadership role Qatar is aiming at.

This research has helped our understanding of interaction on a digital platform by stressing the influence of political logic on sporting events through netnography as a theoretical lens. The exploration of perceptions and standpoints all along the two temporal axes displayed on online videos developed the insight concerning the behavior of mass media users when dealing with sports events. Sport is certainly a powerful medium for reaching out and building relationships but politics stands as an unmistakable backdrop whereby all interveners base their analyses on.

This research somehow pointed out the irrepressible interference of political reasoning in sports on online platforms, but it has not fully covered the issue due to many limitations. The most outstanding setback was the scarcity of videos covering the temporal period before the 2nd December 2010. In addition to this, lots of comments were badly formulated to the extent that it was impossible for us to take them into consideration.

There is always a grander opportunity to investigate the significant role that politics may play in sports through media channels. Academics are asked to seriously reconsider their contribution and implication in sportive affairs. For that, one should investigate the dynamics of mass media in intersection with mega sporting events and the impact of political logic in the Arab world. Sport also needs more research to stand on the problems that deprive the game from being immune from negative influence, and prevent it from playing its part in advancing positive practices nationally and internationally. More attention should be devoted to discourse of subordinates especially its potential impact on domestic politics and foreign affairs by means of a netnographic analysis after the closure of the World Cup 2022. Sports diplomacy needs more attention and research to consolidate its status as a strategic tool in international relations.

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