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Perceptions of FIFA Men's World Cup 2022 Host Nation Qatar in the Twittersphere

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The FIFA Men's World Cup Qatar 2022 has been analyzed through the frameworks of nation branding and soft power. As the world's most popular sport event, the World Cup has the possibility to enhance host nations' images internationally, but we are not aware of empirical work attempting to assess public perceptions of Qatar, despite the considerable attention it has been paid. Accordingly, we assessed the discussion in the Twittersphere to shed some light on whether Qatar's nation-branding and soft power attempts are reflected in public perceptions. We collected, geotagged, and analyzed 4,458,914 tweets with the word "Qatar." We found that, contrary to the expectations of the organizers in Qatar, host nation status has not necessarily brought better nation branding or enhanced soft power, especially in the Global North. We conclude that social media's interactive nature, which enables users to influence the discussion agenda, should have been considered by event organizers.

Keywords: public perceptions, discussion agenda, nation branding, soft power, Twitter

Several scholars have analyzed Qatar's aims as host nation of the upcoming FIFA Men's World Cup Qatar 2022™ (hereafter World Cup 2022) in terms of either "soft power/public diplomacy" (Brannagan & Grix, 2014; Brannagan et al., 2014; Reiche, 2015), or under the prism of "nation branding" (Peterson, 2006; Zeineddine, 2017). On the one hand, public diplomacy scholars, who tend to come from the disciplines of political science or political communication, see the World Cup 2022 as an exercise in soft power by host nation Qatar. They follow traditional lines of thought from scholars such as Joseph Nye (2004, 2008). This strand of scholarship argues that sport mega events play a critical role within Qatar's international strategy (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). On the other hand, nation branding scholars, who tend to come from a public relations/strategic communications perspective (Ibrahim, 2017; Ottenfeld et al., 2019), see the World Cup 2022 as a marketing communication exercise. As such, this scholarship analyzes the event hosting in terms of both establishing and enhancing national reputation, and legacy (Grix et al., 2017), which may in turn enhance soft power. According to this perspective, Qatar's goals in hosting the World Cup 2022 need to be analyzed through the lens of marketing communication and in terms of reputation management (Almutairi et al., 2019; Ibrahim, 2017). In our view, the same mindset also applies to policymakers in Qatar who are organizing the event. Their strategies and approaches seem to focus upon using this event as part of a wider public diplomacy and nation branding effort. Until now, the event has been managed under a marketing communication premise rather than as an issue of political communication.

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These approaches would suggest that, if Qatar is successful in its nation branding and soft power goals, the public discussion about the host nation should reflect these aims, and would be generally positive, featuring themes related to international reputation management. Examination of discussions about Qatar in the academic press reveals a counter narrative. The focus is on issues such as deaths of migrant workers and reported human rights violations (e.g., Campbell, 2015; Millward, 2017), rather than what the organizers intended. A cursory examination of Twitter content suggests a similar trend.

The interactive nature of social media provides users the ability to express their own opinions and perhaps shape the discussion agenda away from the nation branding and soft power goals of the Qatari authorities. Twitter in particular has been examined for the political discussions of users (Effing et al., 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012) and provides an appropriate locale to gauge public perceptions. We are unaware of empirical investigations focused on assessing public perceptions of Qatar, despite the significant criticism the host nation has received and the historical nature of the World Cup 2022, which will be the first to be held in the Arab world. To assess if the nation branding and soft power attempts of the host nation in the buildup to the event are reflected in public discussions, we undertook the analysis of Twitter content. We collected, geotagged, and analyzed 4,458,914 tweets, including all of them that contained the word "Qatar" during roughly a 6-month period, providing an empirical assessment of the success or failure of host nation Qatar's soft power and nation branding efforts during the buildup phase for the World Cup 2022.

Literature Review

Political scientists have often argued that Qatar is a small state trying to have influence on the world stage (Kamrava, 2013; Peterson, 2006). A case in point is when it hosted the talks that

led the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021. These scholars argue that the efforts of Qatar in hosting the World Cup 2022, among other actions, have been to promote and enhance the ability of the nation to influence decisions internationally through soft power (Almaskati, 2014; Brannagan & Grix, 2014; Brannagan et al., 2014; Reiche, 2015). Therefore, Qatar is using this mega sports event as a way of enhancing its position and visibility on the world stage, and to improve its international reputation.

Power is often thought of as a coercive force, but there are many other types of power, including reward, legitimate, expert, referent, and coercion (French & Raven, 1959). While larger states with big militaries have extensive coercive power, small states with limited military power and economies may use noncoercive strategies to survive and even thrive on the international stage. This "soft power" relies on the ability to attract, persuade, and co-opt instead of coercing, via cultural, political, and economic means. Qatar is a small nation with a limited military, which necessitates its use of soft power (Kamrava, 2013).

In this sense, hosting sports mega events, in particular, can be used as a mechanism to develop soft power, which is what Qatar aims to do in via the World Cup 2022 (Brannagan & Grix, 2014; Brannagan et al., 2014). Qatar is in fact the only recent mega events hosting country whose sport expenditures far outstrip military expenditures (Stevens, 2015). By hosting the World Cup 2022, Qatar can project itself as a leading sports destination, capable of managing the largest sporting event on the planet (FIFA.com, 2018) and can distinguish itself from its neighboring countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council by becoming a player on the international stage on par with other mega events hosts such as China, the United States, and Russia. According to this perspective, Qatar aims to gain a reputational advantage that will result in an enhanced image that, in turn, will bring benefits such as not being associated with negative, and sometimes stereotypical perceptions of political and social issues in the region. Qatar thus seeks to create a soft power base via its hosting of the mega event, which is especially important for such a small country without military power in a volatile region. Qatar has had some success in regional politics, as the recent Afghanistan crisis illustrates, but Qatar's attempts to develop soft power have not been fully successful, and in fact, it may have lost power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Nation Branding

The second strand of scholarship analyzes the World Cup 2022 through the lens of nation branding (Ahmed, 2020; Eggeling, 2020; Rookwood, 2019). This scholarship tends to undertake a marketing communications approach to argue that the World Cup 2022 provides an opportunity for Qatar to develop its reputation as a global sporting destination, which will increase its attractiveness for tourists and sports fans.

Although the idea of branding is rooted in the world of product marketing, it has been extended into the geopolitical world via the concept of "nation branding," where governments use marketing methods to uniquely position themselves vis-à-vis other countries (Hankinson, 2015; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). There is a significant amount of scholarship about brands and a variety of different ways of defining them (Aaker, 1996; Anholt, 2013; Dinnie, 2008). Particularly important for nation branding is establishing a brand identity, which involves multiple actions (Aaker, 1996) and requires that customers emotionally connect with the brand (Roll, 2006). The brand identity strategy can make or break the brand and takes time to establish (Clifton & Simmons, 2004; Cravens & Piercy, 2012).

There are several definitions of nation branding, but most, if not all, focus on the perspective of the nation in the eyes of its audience. Nation branding can be defined as the sum of the perceptions of a nation in the mind of its stakeholders, which includes culture, language, history, food, fashion, and celebrities (Fan, 2006), or as an outcome of national reality, which is the perception of the nation from internal and external stakeholders (Walsh & Wiedmann, 2008). It is a multilayered blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded relevance for its audience (Dinnie, 2008). It can contain various functional sectors such as tourism, exports, investments, and public diplomacy (Anholt, 2013; Dooley & Bowie, 2005). If the nation brand is not positive, countries can work to change perceptions (Szondi, 2007). Despite the differences between scholars in defining nation brand, it is widely agreed that it plays a crucial role in a country's economic portfolio and soft power. The effects of strategic nation branding can shape how a country is perceived on the local, regional, and international stages.

Sports Mega Events Hosting as Nation Branding and Soft Power Tools

While there are a variety of mechanisms available for nation branding and soft power building, one in particular that stands out is sports mega events, which naturally garner fans' attention and significant media coverage, making them a powerful tool (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Getz, 2003; Gibson et al., 2008; Hinch & Higham, 2001). Mega events allow the host country to attain global visibility (Cornelissen, 2008), and can help lay the groundwork for gaining international notability and national prestige (Essex & Chalkley, 1998). The sports mega events' audience size can be staggering: The FIFA Men's World Cup 2018 was watched by over half of the world's population (FIFA.com, 2018). Prominent media profiles serve as windows to reflect the imagery of the country and place meanings that can be associated with the nation brand (Florek & Insch, 2011; Hinch & Higham, 2001). Among the many brand-related benefits that have been associated with hosting mega sports events are media attention (Heslop et al., 2013), national identity development and pride, and image change (Hinch & Higham, 2001), increased tourism (Tsiotsou & Gouri, 2010), reinforcing cultural identity, ideas, and products (Gratton & Preuss, 2008), and not surprisingly and perhaps as an outcome of these other effects, soft power (Nauright, 2013 in Knott et al., 2015).

Bidding for the World Cup has increasingly become an attractive and potentially fast route to international recognition and enhancement of the brand of the nation (Heslop et al., 2013). Hosting the FIFA Men's World Cup improved the nation brand of Korea (Kim & Morrison, 2005), Germany (Florek & Insch, 2011), and South Africa (Cornelissen, 2008). Similar outcomes have occurred for other mega events, such as the positive effects of hosting the Olympic Games for Australia (Heslop et al., 2013) and China (Berkowitz et al., 2007).

An examination of the official Qatar 2022 website illustrates that the host nation's goals align with the aims of nation branding and soft power (Qatar 2022, n.d.). The home page displays the message: "Qatar Welcoming the World" against the background of images that depict a football loving, vibrant, modern country that is rooted in culture and traditions. Attractions for tourists including match schedules, accommodations, and activities are highlighted

throughout. Qatar has also attempted to leverage the World Cup to enhance its brand through its "Generation Amazing" initiative. In brief, the campaign is designed to use football as a mechanism to further United Nation's sustainability goals and address social issues in marginalized groups, especially children living in poverty. As of August 2020, the campaign reported it had reached half a million children, with a goal to reach as many more by the start of Qatar 2022 (AS.com, 2020). Whether or not nation branding in the context of hosting mega sport events succeeds is at least partially related to the results of strategic media activities and campaigns such as these by the host nation before, and during the event (Knott et al., 2015).

Discussion Agenda in the Twittersphere

Overall, soft power and nation branding are useful frameworks for understanding the World Cup 2022, but to our knowledge, whether the goals and efforts of host nation Qatar in these areas have been realized has not been empirically evaluated. We reasoned that if Qatar's nation branding and soft power aims are having some success, they would be reflected in public perceptions. Social media provides a particularly suitable place to assess such perceptions. This is because social media users can generate and share content in ways not seen before the digital age. The emergence of social media has led to the decentralization of journalistic power. Even in traditional media, users now have the power to participate through posting opinions on comments sections of websites and advertisements and further, they can create their own sites.

Twitter is one of the most well-known platforms for political conversations and is particularly influential in the Arab region (Dennis et al., 2019). Twitter users engage in political participation on the platform (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Effing et al., 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012; Varol et al., 2014) using it to set the discussion agenda. Politicians use the platform to converse with the electorate (Yang et al., 2016) and politicians' feeds have predicted the news agenda (Conway-Silva et al., 2018). Political figures actively tweet to attract attention (Lee & Xu, 2018). Saudi Arabian Twitter users have tried to create a social movement to raise awareness toward corruption by tweeting and retweeting (Almistadi, 2014; Chaudhry, 2014), and to contest male guardianship rules for women (Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2019). Furthermore, Twitter users have influenced events in the offline world including the Arab Spring (Gerbaudo, 2012; Howard et al., 2011) and Occupy Wall Street (Conover, Davis, et al., 2013; Conover, Ferrara, et al., 2013). With everyone with an internet connection having the power to post their opinions on issues, the discussion agenda may now be driven by media users, providing a useful arena to assess public perceptions (Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2019).

Host nation Qatar aims to enhance its reputation on the global stage via the World Cup 2022; however, whether the desired perceptions are shared by the public has not been assessed. If the goals of nation branding and soft power have succeeded, we would expect the discussion agenda to include positive aspects about the World Cup 2022, as intended by the event organizers, and to be rather uniform across different countries. If Twitter users are setting the discussion agenda, we would expect the discussion to be different in different locations, reflecting local users' interests and to contain a mix of topics and discussions. We thus posed the following research questions: (1) What is the public perception of host nation Qatar in the Twittersphere? and (2) Is the discussion agenda about host nation Qatar different in different geographical places?

Method

To assess what the public conversation about Qatar is, and whether it differs in various countries, we evaluated tweets with the word "Qatar," identifying what topics are discussed where. Because the research questions concern what the discussion about Qatar is on Twitter in light of their status as host nation, tweets with the word "Qatar" were collected and analyzed. Geotagging was used to allow identification of similarities and differences across countries. We coded the topical content of the tweets to identify what the conversation about Qatar is in different countries.

Phase 1: Data Collection and Translation

We collected and analyzed 4,458,914 tweets with the word "Qatar" during a roughly 6-month period, from May to November 2015, with one 2-week period inadvertently omitted. (For complete explanation of tweet collection and parsing as well as word cloud creation see Memon et al., 2017). Typically, World Cup host nations are declared 8 years before they will be hosts, but Qatar was announced 12 years beforehand because of the massive amount of infrastructure that had to be built, including roads, a metro system, hotels, and of course stadia. We chose a time period that was roughly equidistant between the announcement that Qatar would be World Cup host in 2010 and the event itself. This allowed assessment after the initial flurry of mostly negative press that followed the announcement but prior to the "glow" that might be expected to occur closer to the time of the event. We reasoned that this would have given Qatar's branding efforts time to be developed as well as given sufficient time to address the initial negative press. For example, the issue of the scheduling of the event, which was moved from its traditional summertime slot to winter, had already been settled after a 4-year process (Kovessy & Walker, 2015).

We began by compiling a list of translations of the name "Qatar" to 34 different languages. Twitter only supports 34 languages; we included all of them (Twitter.com, n.d.). But, in fact, we translated the word "Qatar" into more languages because "Qatar" is "Qatar" in English, Italian, and other languages. So, one keyword can potentially cover more than one language. Therefore, our keywords not only cover all the 34 languages supported by Twitter, but at least 18 more languages. Tweets containing the word Qatar in any of these languages were then collected through the Twitter streaming Application Programming Interface (API; Twitter Streaming API, n.d.). The raw data, stored in JavaScript Object Notation format, was then parsed and cleaned. Only information necessary to the analysis was extracted, including the screen name of the Twitter users, the timestamps, the tweet ID, the user-disclosed location (location from their bio page), and, most importantly, the tweet text. Tweets were mapped to countries using the user-disclosed location. This process, called geocoding, was done using Nominatim which is the geographic search engine for OpenStreetMap (Nominatim Demo, n.d.). It provides search capabilities very similar to those of Google Maps. Nominatim supports multilingual location search and, for a given input query, returns a ranked list of likely matching place names. This ranking by prominence is useful for disambiguation as, say, most references in Twitter bios for "London" refer to "London, England, United Kingdom" rather than "London, Ohio, United States." As Nominatim is open source, we used an on-site installation to avoid being rate limited by the public and free APIs.

Country of origin could be identified for 1,818,582 tweets, from which we extracted URLs, unigrams, and bigrams, and the

distinct users of the terms per month. If a user tweeted the same tweet two or more times in 1 month, only one occurrence was counted to prevent frequent users from being overemphasized, resulting in data for 652,965 distinct user handles, covering 173 countries. The top 34 countries by total number of tweets, and Nepal (because it sends many workers in Qatar), were included for further analysis; the resulting data set had 1,570,416 tweets. The distribution of tweets varied across the months with May ($n = 291,629$) and June ($n = 287,350$) being the most popular months, followed by September ($n = 282,320$), October ($n = 249,074$), August ($n = 183,306$), July ($n = 168,950$), and then November ($n = 107,787$), from which we inadvertently missed 2 weeks.

Phase 2: Thematic Analysis of Unigrams and Bigrams

Thematic analysis was used to code the tweets as it is particularly well-suited to uncovering patterns in data that are not preidentified or predicted from a theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather, working in an inductive fashion, similar occurrences in the data are grouped together to identify what themes and patterns emerge in an iterative process. Because the data were coded for topical focus, semantic content and cooccurrence were the focus of the coding. We began by coding semantic themes then coded sub and main themes of combined unigrams and bigrams. The unigrams and bigrams were translated when necessary, using native speakers aided by Google Translate. If a unigram or bigram was only found one or two times, it was excluded from further analysis based on low occurrence; if it had three or more occurrences, it was retained. The unigrams and bigrams were coded on the semantic level by grouping the same or extremely similar words together. For example, all occurrences of "world" or "football" were placed in respective groups; "migrant" and "migrants" or "death" and "deaths" were grouped. After the first round of coding, the combined total of unigrams and bigrams across the 35 countries was 3,535, of which 1,600 were unique. Function words including helping verbs, "Doha," numbers, symbols, generic names, place references such as naming the country from which the tweet came, or generic places such as "street" and dates that were not linked to specific events such as Ramadan or the World Cup were excluded from further analysis because they did not have meaningful content to add, resulting in a total of 2,268 grouped unigrams and bigrams in the 35 countries included for analysis, of which 888 were unique. The total number of unigrams and bigrams was 1,763,964.

The resulting categories of semantically grouped unigrams and bigrams were then thematized into larger categories by placing the unigrams and bigrams related to a given topic into the same theme. Word clouds of the unigrams and bigrams were utilized to identify those that had high cooccurrence. For example, "World," "Cup," "World Cup," and "2022" were put into the same category. Forty-two themes were identified, including "World Cup," "Human Rights," "Religion," "Travel," "Regional Conflict," and so forth (see Table 1 for the complete list of themes). The unigrams and bigrams that could not be reliably placed in a category were searched on Twitter's advanced search to examine the parent tweets to aid coding when possible. If a reliable code could not be determined, the unigram or bigram was placed in the "other" category. Then, three other coders checked for reliability by evaluating the coding of the first two coders and reporting any discrepancies. The first author resolved the discrepancies. To ensure accuracy of the manual coding, computer-assisted coding was then conducted to identify and correct any discrepancies. This involved matching the codebook against each coded unigram and bigram by a separate coder using the programming language Python. The first author resolved discrepancies.

The final round of coding involved identifying main themes by combining related themes in a two-step process. Word clouds and, when necessary, parent tweets were again consulted. Related categories such as "Migrant Workers," "Human Rights," "Construction," "Death," and "Stadium" were combined into a subtheme, "Migrant Workers." Three other subthemes emerged: "Corruption" and "Regional Conflict." Some of the categories did not have a subtheme but did connect to a main theme. Thus, the four subthemes and the remaining themes were then combined into the main themes, of which there were six: "World Cup," "Regional Politics and Issues," "Sports" (non-World Cup), "Commerce and Business," "Clock Boy," and "Other" (see Table 1).

Findings and Analysis

Qatar is discussed in tweets across the globe in different ways; in particular, there are differences in both the volume of tweets and the topics, which suggest that the discussion agenda varies in different countries. As we explain below, one of the most striking findings is that denunciations of abuses against migrant workers were mainly made in Global North countries while the discussion is almost invisible in the countries of origin of these individuals. We first discuss the overall distribution of both tweets and the topics that emerged from the coding, then examine the variation in the topics across countries.

In the Twittersphere, users have set their own discussion agenda despite host nation Qatar's goals of reputation building via the World Cup 2022. Our findings thus suggest that the public perception of the host nation in certain countries was not defined by the efforts of nation branding, or enhancing soft power, but by the way Twitter users have set the discussion agenda. The tweets in particular areas of the world show wide criticism of Qatar's hosting of the World Cup, centering mostly around human rights violations of migrant workers, although other aspects such as changing the timing of the event to winter also figured in the discussions, as well as corruption relating to how Qatar may have secured the event by paying bribes.

Furthermore, the amount of conversation on Twitter about Qatar from different countries is quite disproportionate but not commensurate with population size, thus not explained by larger populations contributing more. Additionally, it is dominated neither by countries who send workers to Qatar, nor by those who are geographically close, but instead by the Global North. Neither of these facts would be expected from a nation branding or soft power perspective. Almost half of the unigrams and bigrams, 47%, came from just three countries. The United States had 21% (307,838); and the United Kingdom had 19% (275,375); while France contributed another 7% (103,905). The United States is one of the world's most populated countries, France and the United Kingdom are the 21st and 22nd most populated countries, respectively, in the world. These three countries had the most unigrams and bigrams, despite the fact their populations are smaller than 11 other countries included in the analysis (World Bank, n.d.).

On the other hand, countries that are geographically closer to Qatar and send workers including Bahrain, Kuwait, and Nepal, have much lower amounts of unigrams and bigrams. India, a

Table 1 Frequencies and Percentages of Unigrams and Bigrams

Main theme	Subtheme	Semantic code	*n*	% of second-level unigrams and bigrams	% of total unigrams and bigrams
World Cup					
		World Cup	464,939	57.73	26.36
	Winter World Cup	Winter	20,325	2.52	1.15
	Corruption				
		FIFA administration	91,216	11.33	5.17
		Corruption	35,177	4.37	1.99
		Sponsors	14,257	1.77	0.81
		Subtotal	140,650	17.47	7.97
	Migrant worker conditions				
		Migrant workers	90,953	11.29	5.16
		Death	49,692	6.17	2.82
		Human rights	26,087	3.24	1.48
		Construction	9,780	1.21	0.55
		Stadium	2,894	0.36	0.16
		Subtotal	179,406	22.28	10.17
	Total		805,320	100	45.65
Regional politics and issues					
		Places regional	187,056	49.70	10.60
		Political figures	74,284	19.74	4.21
		Religion	70,334	18.69	3.99
		Arab	6,036	1.60	0.34
	Regional conflict				
		Refugees	20,552	5.46	1.17
		Regional conflict	17,723	4.71	1.00
		Terrorism	376	0.10	0.02
		Subtotal	38,651	10.27	2.19
	Total		376,361	100	21.34
Sports					
		FIFA (non-World Cup)	91,216	29.59	5.17
		Competition	55,730	18.08	3.16
		Football players	41,055	13.32	2.33
		Football clubs	36,051	11.69	2.04
		Competition outcomes	31,494	10.22	1.79
		Football	23,980	7.78	1.36
		Sports (others)	17,805	5.78	1.01
		Sports players (others)	10,965	3.56	0.62
	Total		308,296	100	17.48
Commerce and business					
		Business and finance	94,077	47.74	5.33
		Air travel	40,123	20.36	2.27
		Media	32,663	16.58	1.85
		Organization	19,212	9.75	1.09
		Travel	6,298	3.20	0.36
		Events	4,673	2.37	0.26
	Total		197,046	100	11.17
Clock boy					
		Clock boy	31,317	72.21	1.78
		Arrested	12,055	27.79	0.68
	Total		43,372	100	2.46
Other					
		Other	23,792	70.87	1.35
		Al Dub	9.777	29.13	0.55
	Total		33,569	100	1.90
Grand total			1,763,964	100	100

country that sends many workers to Qatar and is the second largest in the world with a population that is roughly four times that of the United States, contributed only 2.3% of the unigrams and bigrams. Similarly, Pakistan has the fifth largest population in the world and sends workers to Qatar but contributed only 0.92% of the unigrams and bigrams.

Nation branding and soft power frameworks do not account for the facts that the number of unigrams and bigrams is not commensurate to country population size, not higher in counties in the region, and not higher in those who have large worker populations in Qatar. It is, however, in line with the way Twitter works, where conversations are often driven by the interests of the audience thus such variations would be expected.

The second main finding concerns the topics of the unigrams and bigrams. Nation branding and soft power perspectives would expect that the World Cup would be a dominant topic with positive dimensions discussed. For example, one might expect attractive aspects of Qatar to be mentioned by potential tourists, or excited tweets about watching the event from fans or commentary on the host country's ability to successfully stage the event for the first time in the Arab world. While the first of these expectations, that Qatar is discussed in countries across the globe, is borne out by our findings, the second is not.

Namely, the most popular topic in the Twittersphere was not surprisingly the World Cup, with 45.65% of the unigrams and bigrams in this theme. Every country had tweets with the words "World" and "Cup," although not all related unigrams and bigrams occurred in every country. However, in opposition to the expectations of the soft power and branding frameworks, rather than talking about positive components of the event itself or the host country, unigrams and bigrams in this category talked about negative aspects of the event, especially workers' rights and corruption, which goes against the proposed narrative of the event.

The three subthemes within the World Cup theme all discussed negative topics. The most popular was discussion of migrant workers with 22.28% of the World Cup category concerning them. Furthermore, the migrant worker unigrams and bigrams were overwhelmingly negative, and focused on their plight including reportedly high numbers of deaths from the working conditions on World Cup construction projects, human rights issues including the "kafala" employment system, unpaid wages, and their living conditions. In fact, 10.17% of the total unigrams and bigrams across all topics concerned migrant workers and there were not positive tweets about this topic. Examples of tweets in this theme include comments on worker deaths: "STOP Qatar Now and save immigrant worker lives. Compensation must be paid BY FIFA to those families whom have lost the bread winner." Living conditions of workers were also discussed: "the behind the scenes look at the filthy living quarters for migrants #workers in Qatar [URL] #work #hr #foreignworkers." The employment system was also frequently discussed in tweets such as the following: "#qatar is a #slave state in the 21st century. #kafalah is being owned by someone else. #qatarworldcup [URL]" and "There has been no progress on crucial issues of exit permit or the restriction on changing employers in #Qatar's kafala system."

The second topic was also quite negative: Corruption in FIFA and Qatar, especially in the bidding process comprised 17.47% of the World Cup theme. Examples include: "There are now enough leaks into FIFA corruption that must call into question if Russia and Qatar are to host World Cups 2018 and 2022!" "I wouldn't go to #Qatar if you paid me #corruption" and "boycott @[sponsor names], and all other #FIFA sponsors for inadequate response to FIFA corruption and Qatar slavery."

The final theme discussed negative aspects of the event timing. The World Cup is usually held in the summer but because of concerns over high temperatures in Qatar, the event was moved to the winter, which caused significant scheduling issues with negative monetary implications for broadcasting and sponsorship for European football clubs—2.52% of the unigrams and bigrams discussed this topic. Even though the decision to move the event to the winter had been announced by FIFA months before the data collection period, Twitter users were still interested in the topic, as reflected in their discussions. Example tweets include: "I don't know why they would choose Qatar, it is over 120 degrees in the summer they wanna switch it to winter smh." "FIFA is really a s[***] organization. All fingers point to moving 2022 out of Qatar but instead they're doing it in winter" and "From bad to worse. I would rather there was no World Cup in 2022 at all than a winter World Cup in Qatar." The rest of the unigrams and bigrams in this category contained unigrams and bigrams that neutrally identified the event or aspects of it, such as "World Cup," "2022," "bid," or "host."

Because all tweets with the word "Qatar" in them were selected for analysis, there are a variety of topics relevant to Qatar, but not about the World Cup. We found four other themes: regional political and social issues, other sports events, business and commerce, and a news cycle driven event "Clock Boy." The conversation in all of these areas contained positive, negative, and neutral aspects of the topics, as would be expected from Twitter users with an interest in the county. The second most common theme discussed in relation to Qatar concerned primarily regional political, and to a lesser extent, social issues such as religion; it contained 21.34% of the unigrams and bigrams. Other sports events—not the World Cup—including competitions and their results, football clubs, and athletes was the third largest theme comprising 17.48% of the total unigrams and bigrams.

The fourth theme, with 11.17%, was commerce and business related, and included airline travel such as flight arrival updates, topics relating to relocating to the country, financial issues such as employment or business opportunities, and other related issues. The final theme was Clock Boy, a 14-year-old American Muslim, Ahmed Mohamed, who was arrested for bringing a clock to school in Texas that was mistaken for a bomb. Because Qatar provided a scholarship and housing for him and his family to relocate to Qatar, there were many tweets about this event that contained the word "Qatar." Finally, there was a small "other" category, which contained 1.9% of the unigrams and bigrams which could not be reliably coded into another theme such as "murder" or "main battle tank."

Distribution of Unigrams and Bigrams by Country

Using geotagging, we found marked differences in the relative frequencies of each category across the countries. Although tweets in every country mentioned the World Cup, users in just six countries accounted for 68% of the unigrams and bigrams in this theme. The United Kingdom (26.23%) and the United States (23.00%) again dominated the discussion, while Russia (5.65%), France (5.10%), Spain (4.21%), and Canada (3.96%) contributed to a lesser extent. Users in other countries including the Philippines (0.13%), Saudi Arabia (0.16%), Kuwait (0.07%), and Malaysia (0.28%) seemed to be much less interested in the topic. The Philippines especially was an anomaly as the conversation there

was largely focused on the television series AlDub that came to Qatar in a voiced-over version during the data collection period; in fact, close to 50% of the total unigrams and bigrams coded in Philippines were around this topic. This suggests that national agendas in relation to Qatar have an influence and impact upon how events were tweeted, rather than the goals of nation branding and soft power.

The Migrant Worker subtheme was discussed more in some countries than others. Six countries had no discussion of the category at all; two of which, the Philippines and Indonesia, send workers to Qatar. The other four are Malaysia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Two countries dominated this topic, accounting for 69.34% of the unigrams and bigrams. The United Kingdom contributed 42.04% and the United States contributed 28.95%. Furthermore, reported deaths of the workers was discussed in just 14 of the 29 countries that commented on workers, with the United Kingdom and the United States being the top contributors at 55.52% and 13.83%, each respectively. Deaths were also discussed in Spain (6.31%), Canada (5.96%), Australia (5.46%), Ireland (3.56%), and the Netherlands (2.36%) and to a lesser extent in Germany, India, France, Italy, Japan, Argentina, and Chile.

Similarly, corruption was discussed much more in some countries, was an infrequent topic in some, and was entirely absent in others. The United Kingdom (20.81%) and the United States (19.23%) again dominated the discussion. The next four countries in order of frequency were Spain (7.68%), Mexico (4.65%), Russia (4.10%), and Turkey (3.45%). It was not discussed at all in Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Philippines and was discussed infrequently in the remaining countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

Contrary to the initial expectations of the organizers in Qatar, hosting the World Cup 2022 has not necessarily brought better nation branding or enhanced soft power during the buildup phase. Although the mega event has contributed to greater visibility of the nation on the world stage, the analysis provided here suggests that not all publicity is good. Instead, many online discussions have focused upon the violation of human rights among workers and other negative topics such as corruption and bribes during the bidding process. This has mainly happened within the Twittersphere in the United States and some countries in Europe. Significant negative scrutiny from the Global North has meant that Qatar has been widely branded as a systematic offender of human rights of lower class workers and as a nation that is willing to pay bribes to be World Cup 2022 host nation.

Although nation branding and soft power approaches are perfectly valid and insightful as part of a broader explanatory theoretical framework, we argue that they may fall short of a more comprehensive understanding of what has actually happened in relation to international public opinion expressed, especially seen in Twitter, regarding this mega event. Nation branding and soft power perspectives struggle to account for the overwhelmingly negative discussion of the World Cup 2022, and do not go beyond describing the efforts as failures.

We argue that scholars should also analyze the discussion about World Cup 2022 host nation Qatar under more critical conceptual perspectives provided by the fields of political communication and media studies. Interdisciplinary research has the potential of bridging such gaps and providing a more comprehensive and nuanced view on the issue. This means incorporating the notion of groups' influence on the discussion agenda rather than just using nation branding and soft power as explanatory theoretical frameworks. This will allow us to better understand why, instead of enhancing the projection of soft power and regional and global influence as well as being a leading sports tourist destination, the organization of this mega event has rather meant a backlash that has put Qatar under the spotlight, especially in relation to abuses of human rights of its migrant worker population and corruption.

The approach we suggest incorporates broader elements in relation to how public perceptions and attitudes may not reflect the goals of nation branding and soft power but rather may reflect the discussion agendas of social media users. This because the type of exposure that facilitates soft power is a two-way street on the ground. The interactive nature of social media has provided users with platforms to voice their ideas and express their agreement or disagreement. Groups can and do influence what is discussed and how in the political arena (Halpin & Fraussen, 2019; Livingston, 1992), and marginalized groups may be able to express themselves (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013). Despite nation branding and soft power attempts, media users form their own opinions, which are often contrary to the intentions of those seeking to wield power, in this case Qatar. Event organizers did not seem to grasp this fundamental and well-established fact and approached the event not as a political one, in which careful attention would need to be paid to audience perceptions, but rather treated it as an effort in nation branding and soft power.

We would, however, be wrong to assume that this necessarily matters in the broader strategy of Qatar in positioning itself as a global diplomatic player, or pushing for internal reforms, which might be why the authorities in that country took the gamble of organizing this event. Qatar's leadership has historically focused on creating networks in the Global South and projecting soft power there. For example, in the case of Al-Jazeera, Qatar was not trying to project soft power in the Global North—although many years later it did attempt (and failed) to create Al-Jazeera America. Rather, Qatar launched Al-Jazeera to develop soft power in the Global South, especially the Middle East and North African region, a goal in which they have broadly speaking succeeded (Oifi, 2005; Seib, 2005, 2008).

The case of hosting the World Cup 2022 was very different as Qatar was in fact aiming to be a player on the international stage globally, including among Western audiences; a point on which the soft power and national branding scholars agree (Ahmed, 2020; Almaskati, 2014; Rookwood, 2019). In this sense, the results here indicate that the initial strategy of projecting soft power may have worked generally in the Global South if not as much as in the Global North. Our findings also suggest that negative discussions have mostly happened in the Global North rather than in the Global South. However, the Global South is where most of Qatar's migrant workers come from and where supposed FIFA bribes occurred. Yet, these are not issues discussed much in the Global South's Twittersphere.

Qatar, within the span of a few short years, has drastically shifted from being a country that was nowhere on the radar, to being heavily discussed across the world, in quite diverse countries. Twitter users have a large number of posts about Qatar, many of which are focused on the World Cup. Sports are a trigger for emotional heat, which can make them an effective mechanism for attracting attention and developing a nation's brand (Gratton & Preuss, 2008). In light of the findings that over 60% of the tweets were about the World Cup or other sports, it is safe to conclude that Qatar's nation branding efforts, especially via sports events hosting, have at least attracted attention. The hoped-for ultimate outcomes of using this event for nation branding efforts and to increase

the country's soft power (Tsiotsou & Gouri, 2010) have not been to no avail, but according to our own research what has occurred is far more complex than may have been initially expected. While by hosting the event, Qatar has landed itself in the international spotlight, it has not been able to control the narrative, especially in the Global North, hence, corroborating our claim that nation branding and soft power perspectives cannot fully account for what has happened in this specific case.

Future research could examine other time periods to ascertain if the conversation about Qatar changes over time. Informal examination of Twitter suggests that the persistent topic of migrant worker rights is still a pressing issue for users, even after the 1-year countdown clock started in November of 2020. There have been some more positive posts, but a "honeymoon" period does not appear to have yet materialized. Empirical examination would add insight to the topic. Future research could also examine other social media sites, such as Reddit or Facebook, to compare if users in different platforms have similar or different discussion agendas about the Qatar 2022 World Cup.

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