

THE BACKLASH OF QATAR'S 2022 FIFA WORLD CUP SPORTSWASHING: STRATEGIC MISSTEPS IN GEOPOLITICAL REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Global sporting mega-events occupy a contested position in international relations, simultaneously embodying ideals of unity while serving as instruments of political reputation management. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar provides a critical case for examining the conditions under which sport-based reputation enhancement strategies generate international criticism rather than intended legitimacy gains. This study critically examines Qatar's strategic objectives for hosting the tournament, including economic diversification, geopolitical positioning, and nation branding, and analyses the backlash that emerged across multiple domains, including corruption allegations, labour rights violations, LGBTQ+ rights suppression, and environmental contradictions. Drawing on a qualitative case study methodology employing critical document analysis of government statements, FIFA records, media reports, and human rights organisation documents, the study develops two theoretical contributions: the concept of 'reputational arbitrage' [the miscalculation that mega-event visibility can outpace the visibility of governance contradictions] and the 'transparency paradox' framework [specifying mechanisms of infrastructural visibility, stakeholder multiplicity, and temporal mismatch that render contemporary sportswashing vulnerable to reputational backfire]. Findings indicate that Qatar's sportswashing efforts encountered systematic vulnerability because promotional narratives diverged from operational realities under conditions of digital interconnectedness and networked transnational activism. The study proposes policy recommendations for mitigating sportswashing and protecting human rights in future mega-events, contributing to scholarship on sport governance, organisational legitimacy, and strategic reputation management under geopolitical pressure.

Keywords: Sportswashing, FIFA World Cup, Sports governance, Ethical sports, Sport and politics

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sports have long been praised as a vehicle for promoting positive values and social change. Events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup are framed as celebrations of shared humanity, yet their universal appeal also makes them vulnerable to exploitation (Kobierecki & Strozek, 2021). The “beautiful game” of football is uniquely positioned to bridge divides, with its global reach and ability to ignite collective passion (Yiapanas et al., 2022). Yet this very power also makes football a contested space, one where the ideals of fairness and integrity can clash with external agendas. When the world's attention turns to major sporting events, the stakes extend far beyond the field. The challenge lies in ensuring that the transformative potential of sport is not co-opted by interests that undermine its core principles (Bianco & Sons, 2023).

While sports can be a force for good, their universal appeal and positive associations also make them vulnerable to exploitation by regimes seeking to rehabilitate their international images, a practice known as sportswashing. Through hosting or sponsoring major sporting events, governments with questionable human rights records or authoritarian tendencies attempt to divert global attention from their abuses, instead projecting an image of modernity, openness, and legitimacy (Roslender, 2024). High-profile competitions offer a mechanism by which geopolitical agendas may be advanced alongside athletic event (Fruh et al., 2023). Historically, regimes have used sports to rebrand their international image, from Nazi Germany's 1936 Olympics to Qatar's 2022 World Cup, where accusations of corruption and repression were overshadowed by spectacle (Molinelli, 2025). Beyond events, sportswashing extends to state-owned investments in elite clubs, sponsorship deals, and celebrity endorsements, all designed to associate repressive systems with the prestige of sport. The danger lies in how effectively these efforts can sanitise reputations, using the emotional power of sports to mute criticism and rewrite narratives. When sport becomes a tool of soft power, its ideals of fairness and integrity risk being sidelined for political gain (Gläbel et al., 2025).

1.1 The Rise of Gulf States in Sports: Ambition, Investment, and Influence

Gulf states have transformed into key influencers in international sports, using their wealth to diversify economies and reshape global perceptions. Saudi Arabia's acquisition of Newcastle United, Qatar's ownership of Paris Saint-Germain, and the UAE's role in Formula 1 illustrate this strategic expansion (Amara & Akindes, 2024), which aligns with national plans such as Qatar's National Vision 2030

(General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). Politically, sports provide an opportunity to present an image of progress and stability, countering negative perceptions. Events like the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix and the 2022 World Cup also help engage global audiences, drawing visitors and fostering domestic unity (Banda et al., 2024).

However, this rise has not been without controversy. Gulf states are accused of using sports to divert attention from human rights violations, worker exploitation, and social restrictions. The influx of Gulf investment has also raised concerns about unfair advantages in competition, with some arguing that excessive spending disrupts the balance in football. As Gulf nations continue to expand their reach in sports, the debate over their true motivations and the consequence of their influence remains unresolved (Grix & Brannagan, 2024a). The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar represents a pivotal case study in the intersection of sports, politics, and human rights. While mega sporting events traditionally promote ideals of unity and fair competition, Qatar's hosting rights have drawn unprecedented scrutiny regarding labour rights abuses, migrant worker exploitation, and allegations of corruption in the bidding process (Gerschewski et al., 2024). This controversy highlights the growing tension between the positive potential of global sports and their exploitation for reputation management. Academic research has increasingly examined how authoritarian regimes use sports to reshape their international image, yet gaps remain in understanding the long-term effectiveness of such strategies and their ethical implications.

1.2 Aim and Significance of the Study

Despite Qatar's efforts to showcase progress through infrastructure development and global engagement, persistent criticism suggests that sportswashing may provoke backlash rather than rehabilitation. This raises critical questions about accountability in international sports governance and the responsibilities of global institutions like FIFA. Leaning on the above, this study aims to examine Qatar's strategy for the 2022 FIFA World Cup and critically highlight the backlash that ultimately exposed its limitations. Furthermore, the study will propose concrete recommendations and policy proposals on how to mitigate sportswashing and protect human rights in mega-sporting events. In doing so, this study makes three distinct contributions. First, it moves beyond documenting sportswashing to theorising its failure conditions, introducing the concept of 'reputational arbitrage', the miscalculation that the visibility of a mega-event can outpace the visibility of its contradictions. Second, it develops the 'transparency paradox' as a formal framework with three constitutive mechanisms (infrastructural visibility, stakeholder multiplicity, and temporal mismatch) that explain why contemporary sportswashing attempts face systematic vulnerability to reputational backfire. Third, it bridges sportswashing scholarship with organisational legitimacy theory, demonstrating how symbolic management strategies backfire when promotional narratives diverge from operational realities.

Through this analysis, the study demonstrates how global scrutiny undermined Qatar's reputation management efforts while arguing for systemic changes to prevent similar scenarios. This research holds substantial relevance for understanding how global sporting events intersect with geopolitical strategies and human rights concerns. The examination of Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup provides critical insights into the evolving dynamics of sportswashing, particularly how nations attempt to reshape their international image through sports. The study's findings illuminate the growing resistance to such tactics, demonstrating that increased global media scrutiny and activist campaigns can effectively challenge reputation-laundering efforts.

The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes attempt to use soft power through sports, while highlighting how these efforts face increasing vulnerability to coordinated pushback from global civil society. The study ultimately demonstrates how contemporary sportswashing attempts must navigate an increasingly sceptical global audience and robust accountability mechanisms. Moreover, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, showing that mega-events now come with heightened risks of reputational backlash rather than guaranteed soft power gains. Academically, the study bridges important gaps between sports management, political science, and human rights scholarship, providing a framework to assess future cases of sportswashing. Moving beyond theoretical analysis, the study's practical recommendations offer a roadmap for instituting ethical standards in hosting future mega-sporting events. Through translating critique into actionable reforms, this research actively contributes to more transparent and accountable sports governance.

Beyond its political and human rights implications, this study speaks directly to contemporary debates in strategic management and organisational studies. The Qatar World Cup represents a critical case of how geopolitical trends, including regional rivalries, transnational activism, and the democratisation of media, shape organisational decision-making and reputational risk. For managers, policymakers, and institutional actors, the case illustrates the failure of what might be termed "reputational arbitrage": the assumption that the visibility of a mega-event can outpace the visibility of its contradictions. By examining how both state and non-state actors [FIFA, sponsors, host nation] navigated the geopolitical pressures surrounding the tournament, this study offers actionable insights for organisations considering similar strategies of legitimacy-seeking through high-profile international events.

1.3 Research Gap

Despite growing scholarly attention to sportswashing, significant gaps remain in literature. First, existing research has largely focused on documenting sportswashing as a phenomenon or tracing its historical precedents, yet limited empirical attention has been paid to understanding the conditions under which such strategies fail. Second, while scholars have identified individual instances of backlash against sportswashing attempts, no systematic framework explains why contemporary sportswashing may be increasingly vulnerable to reputational backfire compared with historical cases. Third, the organisational and managerial dimensions of sportswashing, specifically, how institutional actors miscalculate reputational risk when leveraging mega-events for strategic legitimacy, remain undertheorised. This

study addresses these gaps by examining Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup as a critical case of sportswashing failure, developing the concept of 'reputational arbitrage' to explain the strategic miscalculation underpinning such efforts.

■ 2.0 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Sportswashing refers to the deliberate use of sports investments or mega-events by nations, corporations, or individuals to divert attention from unethical practices, human rights violations, or poor governance (Grix et al., 2023). Through high-profile sponsorships, tournament hosting, or team acquisitions, entities attempt to rehabilitate their international image by associating with the positive values of sports competitions. This strategy exploits sport's universal appeal and emotional resonance to obscure controversies, often targeting global audiences while suppressing domestic dissent (Bergkvist & Skeiseid, 2024). Many examples include authoritarian regimes hosting global sporting events or using elite clubs for soft power (Grix & Brannagan, 2024b). It is argued that sportswashing manipulates public perception, prioritising reputation management over meaningful reform, though its long-term efficacy remains contested amid increasing activist and media scrutiny (Dubinsky, 2023b).

2.1 Soft Power, Nation Branding, and the Strategic Use of Sports

The concepts of soft power and nation branding have become central to contemporary international relations, particularly in how states cultivate global influence beyond military or economic might (Dubinsky, 2023c). Soft power refers to a nation's ability to shape preferences and attract others through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies, rather than coercion (Banda et al., 2024). Nation branding builds on this idea, encompassing deliberate efforts to construct and promote a country's image to advance economic, political, and social goals (Yiapanas et al., 2024a). Together, these frameworks enable states to project influence, attract investment, and enhance their geopolitical standing (Grix et al., 2023).

Sports have emerged as a potent tool for both soft power and nation branding. Mega-events like the Olympics or the World Cup offer unparalleled visibility, allowing host nations to showcase modernity, cultural heritage, and organisational prowess. [i.e. Japan's 2020 Olympics highlighted technological innovation and disaster resilience, while South Africa's 2010 World Cup reinforced post-apartheid reconciliation]. Similarly, investments in elite football clubs or motorsports franchises, such as Qatar's ownership of Paris Saint-Germain or Saudi Arabia's involvement in Formula 1, serve as long-term branding platforms, associating nations with excellence and glamour (Keskin, 2024).

However, the instrumentalisation of sports for soft power is not without controversy. Such efforts often prioritise perception over substance, particularly when autocratic regimes use sports to obscure human rights abuses or democratic deficits (Dubinsky, 2023b). Sportswashing captures this tension, revealing how the alignment of sports with national branding strategies can backfire under scrutiny. While sports can amplify soft power, their success ultimately depends on the authenticity of the values projected and the willingness to address underlying criticisms (Gläsel et al., 2025). From a management perspective, the strategic use of sports for nation branding can be understood as a form of organisational legitimacy-seeking behaviour (Yiapanas et al., 2024b).

Drawing on institutional theory, states and governing bodies engage in symbolic management, deploying visible, high-profile events to signal alignment with global norms of progress, hospitality, and organisational competence. However, as the Qatar case will demonstrate, such strategies carry inherent risks when symbolic claims diverge from operational realities. In an era of heightened transparency and mobilised stakeholder activism, legitimacy becomes contingent upon verifiable action rather than promotional narrative, a lesson with direct implications for managers across industries who engage in reputation management strategies.

2.2 Sportswashing in Authoritarian Contexts

The strategic use of mega-sporting events by authoritarian regimes for sportswashing has deep historical roots, with two of the most prominent examples being the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 1980 Moscow Olympics, both of which were used as tools of political propaganda amid significant geopolitical tensions (Grix & Brannagan, 2024a). The 1936 Berlin Olympics demonstrated how authoritarian regimes could use sport to temporarily divert global attention from domestic repression, while the 1980 Moscow Olympics revealed the vulnerabilities of such strategies when confronted with international boycotts and media scrutiny (Molinelli, 2025). These historical cases illustrate how authoritarian regimes have long recognised the symbolic power of sports to shape global narratives, yet they also reveal the limitations of sportswashing when confronted with international resistance and media scrutiny.

Contemporary authoritarian states like Russia and China have similarly employed sportswashing, with Russia's 2014 Sochi Olympics and 2018 World Cup overshadowed by doping scandals and military aggression, and China's 2008 and 2022 Olympics coinciding with domestic crackdowns (Dubinsky, 2023b; Edelman, 2024). These cases highlight a critical paradox: while sports offer authoritarian regimes a unique platform to manipulate perception, they also create vulnerabilities (Boykoff, 2022). The historical lessons of Berlin and Moscow suggest that sportswashing can achieve short-term propaganda victories but often fails to sustain long-term legitimacy, particularly when the dissonance between image and reality becomes too glaring (Molinelli, 2025). In today's digital age, where information flows rapidly and civil society networks are highly mobilised, the risks of backlash are even greater (Matras, 2024). Yet, the continued pursuit of mega-events by authoritarian states indicates that the allure of sportswashing persists, driven by the enduring belief that the spectacle of sports can temporarily override political and ethical concerns. Ultimately, the historical and modern cases of

sportswashing reveal not only the strategies of authoritarian image-making but also the growing resilience of global accountability mechanisms, proving that while sports can be weaponised for propaganda, they can also become arenas for resistance and exposure (Gläsel et al., 2025).

■ 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the form of a conceptual/critical review paper. Rather than presenting primary empirical data, the study synthesises and critically evaluates existing documentary evidence to develop theoretical insights into sportswashing as a strategic phenomenon. This approach is appropriate because the research aim is not to test hypotheses or measure variables, but to theorise the conditions under which sportswashing strategies fail and to develop conceptual frameworks (reputational arbitrage, transparency paradox) that can inform future research and practice (Cheong et al., 2023).

3.1 Case Selection

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was selected as the focal case because it represents a critical instance of sportswashing failure. As the first Middle Eastern nation to host football's premier event, Qatar's tournament generated unprecedented levels of global scrutiny and backlash, making it analytically useful for understanding the limits of sportswashing as a reputation management strategy.

3.2 Source Material

The analysis draws on publicly available documentary sources, including Qatari government statements, press releases, and leadership speeches; FIFA official communications and reports (García & Borbély, 2014; Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2019); investigative journalism and news coverage from internationally recognised outlets; human rights organisation reports (Amnesty International, 2016); and peer-reviewed academic literature on sportswashing, soft power, and sports governance (Bergkvist & Skeiseid, 2024; Boykoff, 2022; Dubinsky, 2023b; Grix et al., 2023; Roslender, 2024). Sources were selected based on relevance to Qatar's World Cup, credibility of the issuing organisation, and representation of diverse perspectives. No primary data collection (interviews, surveys, or fieldwork) was undertaken.

3.3 Analytical Process

Sources were read and reread to identify recurring themes, patterns of contestation between different actor groups, and points where official narratives diverged from investigative reporting. The analysis is organised around two main dimensions: Qatar's strategic objectives [economic diversification, geopolitical positioning, cultural diplomacy, national branding] and the backlash generated [corruption, labour exploitation, LGBTQ+ rights suppression, environmental hypocrisy, fabricated fan engagement, questionable football credentials]. These dimensions were derived from the source material through iterative reading.

3.4 Positioning

Consistent with the conventions of conceptual/critical review papers, this study does not claim to test hypotheses or produce generalisable empirical findings. Rather, it offers theoretical development, critical synthesis of existing evidence, and policy recommendations derived from systematic analysis of documentary sources.

■ 4.0 ANALYSIS

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar represents one of the most ambitious and controversial sportswashing endeavours in modern history. As the first Middle Eastern nation to host a global football tournament, Qatar sought to transform its global image from a conservative gas-rich monarchy to a progressive, cosmopolitan hub. This strategic move formed part of a broader effort to secure Qatar's position on the world stage while diversifying its economy. Qatar's ambition in hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022 was driven by a multi-dimensional vision that extended well beyond football. It was designed not only to bring the global spotlight to the small Gulf nation but also to position Qatar as a forward-thinking regional power, stimulate economic diversification, and accelerate national development in line with QNV 2030. At the heart of Qatar's ambition was the use of soft power to enhance its global image. With its successful bid for hosting the FIFA World Cup, Qatar sought to project itself as a modern, capable, and culturally rich nation (Dubinsky, 2023a). The World Cup provided a platform for Qatar to shape international perceptions, demonstrating its ability to manage complex, large-scale global events while emphasising its cultural identity and hospitality. This soft power strategy was rooted in Qatar's broader geopolitical approach. In recent years, Qatar has positioned itself as an influential mediator and international player, using diplomacy, investment, and global partnerships. Hosting the World Cup further reinforced this strategy by allowing Qatar to assert its presence on the world stage, engage with international stakeholders, and foster intercultural dialogue (Dubinsky, 2024).

4.1 Exploring Qatar's Strategy

Qatar's World Cup bid was central to a multifaceted strategy encompassing economic diversification, infrastructure development, geopolitical positioning, and global branding, all aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030 (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2019; Kerry et al., 2024). Through its pursuit of the World Cup and related investments, Qatar effectively used sports as a

vehicle for national transformation and international projection.

4.1.1 Economic Diversification and Development Strategy

Qatar's economy has long been dominated by the extraction and export of oil and natural gas. While this resource wealth has delivered immense prosperity, the Qatari leadership recognised the limitations of continued dependence on hydrocarbons. The World Cup offered a timely and high-profile mechanism to accelerate diversification and stimulate sectors such as tourism, real estate, and knowledge-based industries (Al-Sulaiti & Al-Khalifa, 2023). The financial scale of Qatar's World Cup preparations was unprecedented. Over \$6.5 billion was dedicated to stadium construction alone, with an additional \$36 billion invested in the Doha Metro system. These infrastructure projects were designed not only to meet FIFA's requirements but also to leave a legacy that would underpin future urban and economic growth (Al-Muhammadi et al., 2024).

The tournament catalysed wider infrastructure development, including the expansion of Hamad International Airport, improvements in road networks, and increased hotel and hospitality capacity. These assets were strategically developed to sustain tourism and business travel beyond 2022. In this way, the World Cup acted as both a deadline and a motivator for projects that might otherwise have taken decades to complete (Henderson, 2014). In tandem with physical infrastructure, Qatar invested heavily in human capital development. Institutions like the Aspire Academy emerged as regional hubs for athletic training, while partnerships with international universities and research institutions helped expand Qatar's capacity in education and innovation. These initiatives supported the transition to a knowledge economy, fulfilling key pillars of QNV 2030 (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008).

4.1.2 Infrastructure and Urban Development

Qatar's World Cup preparations included seven new stadiums with innovative cooling technologies, a \$36 billion Doha Metro system, and expanded airport capacity (Al-Dosari, 2020). However, the scale of construction required hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, whose living and working conditions became a focal point of international criticism. These projects aimed not just to meet tournament needs but to establish lasting assets that would support Qatar's long-term development goals (Al-Sulaiti & Al-Khalifa, 2023). The scale of construction required importing hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, primarily from South Asia and Africa. Their living and working conditions became a focal point of international criticism, despite Qatari efforts to improve labour standards through reforms to the kafala system. The tension between Qatar's desire to showcase architectural marvels and the human cost of their construction revealed a central contradiction in its sportswashing strategy (Nikolaou et al., 2023).

4.1.3 Geopolitical Positioning and Soft Power Projection

The World Cup bid formed a crucial component of Qatar's distinctive approach to regional and international relations. Situated between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, Qatar has long pursued an independent foreign policy that occasionally brought it into conflict with neighbouring Gulf states. The 2017-2021 blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt demonstrated Qatar's vulnerability despite its wealth, making soft power projection through sports an attractive complement to traditional diplomacy (Rookwood, 2019). Hosting the World Cup allowed Qatar to strengthen ties with global powers while asserting its autonomy within the Gulf Cooperation Council. The tournament became a platform for demonstrating Qatar's resilience and ability to operate independently of Saudi influence, particularly in cultural and sporting domains (Dubinsky, 2023a). Qatar's sports diplomacy extended beyond the World Cup through ownership of Paris Saint-Germain and sponsorship deals with major European clubs and tournaments (Nicolliello, 2025). These investments created lasting connections with Western institutions and audiences, providing channels for influence that complemented traditional diplomatic networks (AlSaeed, 2025). The World Cup served as the centrepiece of this strategy, offering unparalleled global visibility and opportunities for relationship-building with international stakeholders (Yiapanas & Thrassou, 2022).

4.1.4 Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Qatar used the World Cup to showcase its cultural ambitions, with the opening ceremony and parallel programming at institutions like the Museum of Islamic Art designed to position the nation as a cultural hub (Brannagan et al., 2023). Sporting diplomacy formed another key dimension of Qatar's soft power strategy. The country hosted numerous international delegations and used the tournament to strengthen ties with football federations worldwide. These relationships extended beyond the World Cup, with Qatar securing hosting rights for other major events, including the Asian Cup and potentially future Olympic bids. The long-term cultivation of such connections demonstrated Qatar's understanding of sports as a tool for sustained influence rather than one-off publicity (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016).

4.1.5 National Identity and Social Transformation

The World Cup project played a significant role in Qatar's evolving national identity construction. For a country where citizens constitute a minority of the population, the tournament offered an opportunity to foster national pride and social cohesion. The government framed the event as a historic achievement for both Qatar and the broader Arab world, emphasising themes of regional unity and cultural heritage in its messaging (Brannagan et al., 2023). Qatari authorities carefully curated the tournament's cultural dimensions to present a specific vision of national identity that balanced tradition with modernity. The opening ceremony and related cultural programming highlighted Qatar's Arab and Islamic heritage while showcasing its technological sophistication and global outlook. This narrative sought to position Qatar as a bridge between cultures and civilisations, capable of honouring its traditions while engaging constructively with the modern world.

(Henderson, 2014). The World Cup also accelerated certain social changes, particularly regarding women's visibility in public life. Female presenters and commentators featured prominently in Qatari media coverage of the tournament, reflecting gradual shifts in gender norms (Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). However, these changes occurred within carefully defined boundaries that maintained the country's conservative social foundations, illustrating the selective nature of reform in service of sportswashing objectives.

4.1.6 Global Branding, Public Relations and Image Management

Qatar deployed sophisticated public relations strategies, engaging Western PR firms, leveraging ownership of beIN Sports, and hosting journalists on managed press trips to shape favourable narratives (Hajjaj et al., 2024; Theodoropoulou & Alos, 2020). These efforts extended to digital platforms, where Qatar invested heavily in social media campaigns and influencer partnerships. The country's official World Cup accounts emphasised spectacular visuals of stadiums, cultural events, and happy fans, creating an alternative narrative to critical reporting by Western media outlets. This multipronged approach demonstrated Qatar's understanding of contemporary media landscapes and its determination to compete in the global information environment (Ekren & Anagnostopoulos, 2023). While the bid succeeded in putting Qatar on the global map, it also exposed the nation to intense international scrutiny regarding labour rights, human rights, and governance issues. This paradox highlights the complex trade-offs involved in Qatar's strategic calculation; the World Cup achieved its goal of elevating Qatar's global profile but simultaneously made the country vulnerable to criticism that continues to shape its international reputation years after the tournament concluded.

4.2 The Backlash: Limits of Sportswashing

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was meant to be a crowning achievement, a dazzling showcase of Arab culture, global unity and hospitality. Instead, it generated sustained critical responses that illustrate the potential limitations of sportswashing strategies (Swart & Hussain, 2023). Qatar faced a firestorm of criticism on multiple fronts, from damning allegations of bribery in its World Cup bid process to systemic exploitation of migrant workers, draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and tensions between sustainability claims and documented emissions outcomes. The tournament became a geopolitical flashpoint while simultaneously raising fundamental questions about whether a nation with virtually no football tradition should have ever been awarded the world's premier sporting event (Figure 1).

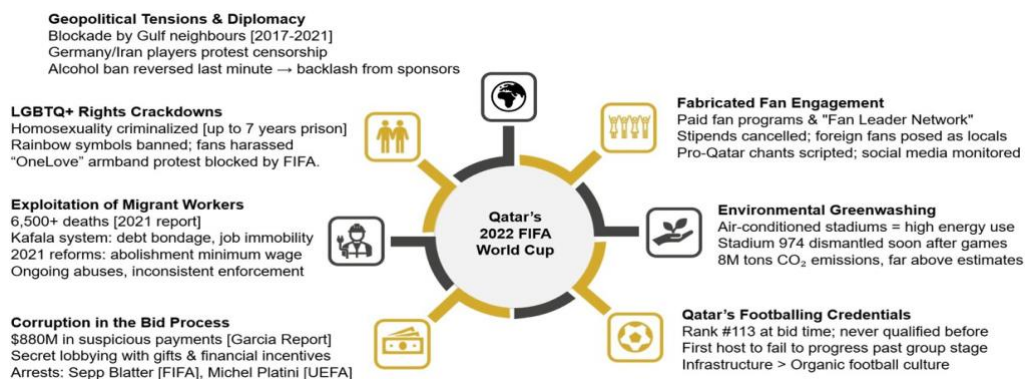


Figure 1 The backlash against Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup sportswashing

Qatar's ambitious attempt to rebrand itself through the world's most-watched sporting event collided with an unprecedented wave of global scrutiny, exposing the inherent contradictions of using sports to clean a nation's reputation.

4.2.1 Corruption and Controversy in Qatar's Bid Process

The awarding of the World Cup to Qatar in 2010 immediately raised suspicions, sparking a backlash that would plague the tournament for over a decade. Investigations later revealed systemic corruption in the bidding process, with leaked documents and whistleblower testimonies exposing how Qatar secured votes through illicit means (Matheson et al., 2024). The "Garcia Report", FIFA's internal investigation, identified suspicious payments, bonuses, and gifts linked to Qatari bid officials (Garcia & Borbély, 2014), while The Sunday Times uncovered emails showing Qatar's bid team had secretly lobbied FIFA executives with lavish gifts and undisclosed financial incentives (Refai & Eissa, 2017).

The backlash intensified as evidence mounted that Qatar had misrepresented its capabilities. Critics highlighted the country's extreme summer heat, forcing an unprecedented winter scheduling change, and its lack of football infrastructure, issues allegedly overlooked due to bribes rather than merit. Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter later admitted awarding the tournament to Qatar was a "mistake", while UEFA chief Michel Platini was arrested for allegedly accepting favours from Qatari officials (Bean, 2015). Beyond corruption, the bid's human rights implications drew fierce condemnation.

The disconnect between Qatar's promises of reform and its actions powered accusations of "double sportswashing", using the bid to launder its reputation while failing to address systemic issues (Sönmez et al., 2023). The fallout redefined FIFA's governance, triggering arrests of top officials and reforms like term limits. However, Qatar's victory stood, proving how deeply corruption had taken root and how sportswashing could succeed temporarily, even amid overwhelming backlashes. The bid process became a cautionary tale of how money and power could distort sport's integrity, leaving lasting scars on FIFA's credibility.

4.2.2 The Exploitation of Migrant Workers and Qatar's Labour Reform Efforts

The documented working conditions of migrant workers became the most damning controversy surrounding Qatar's World Cup preparations. A 2021 investigation revealed that over 6,500 migrant workers from South Asia and Africa had died in Qatar since the country won its bid in 2010 (Qadri, 2022), with many fatalities linked to extreme heat, dangerous working conditions, and reported failures in occupational health oversight (Al Thani, 2021). Workers endured the oppressive kafala system, which trapped them in cycles of debt bondage, withheld wages, and restricted their ability to change jobs or leave the country (Gattoni & Crowe, 2014). Facing intense international scrutiny, Qatar implemented significant labour reforms, including abolishing the kafala system in 2021, introducing a minimum wage, and establishing a committee to oversee worker welfare in partnership with international organisations (Cholewinski & Guttman, 2023).

However, enforcement remained inconsistent, with persistent reports of wage theft, unsafe conditions, and restricted freedoms undermining the credibility of these changes. The government's reluctance to release official data on worker deaths or establish a comprehensive compensation fund further eroded trust, forcing last-minute settlements only as global media pressure peaked (Amnesty International, 2016). These failures exposed the fundamental tension in Qatar's sportswashing strategy: while the World Cup prompted some reforms, it also revealed how superficial changes could not mask deep-seated structural issues (O'Rourke & Theodoraki, 2022). The tournament became both a showcase of national ambition and a stark reminder of the human costs behind the glittering stadiums, ultimately highlighting the limits of using mega-events to whitewash systemic labour abuses (Gläbel et al., 2025).

4.2.3 LGBTQ+ Rights Crackdowns

Qatar's treatment of LGBTQ+ rights emerged as one of the most contentious human rights issues during the 2022 World Cup, starkly contradicting FIFA's purported values of inclusion and diversity (Suresh, 2024). In a nation where homosexuality remains illegal under penal code Article 285 [punishable by up to seven years in prison], LGBTQ+ fans and players faced systematic discrimination throughout the tournament (Ramdan & Muhammad Abdul, 2025). FIFA amplified this repression by banning the "OneLove" rainbow armbands, threatening sporting sanctions, including immediate yellow cards for captains who wore them, forcing European teams to abandon their planned protest (Lee, 2025). Stadium security personnel routinely confiscated Pride flags and rainbow-colored items, while multiple LGBTQ+ fans reported being harassed or denied entry to matches (Heerdt, 2023). This crackdown exposed the fundamental hypocrisy of Qatar's attempts to portray itself as a tolerant host nation while maintaining draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws, with FIFA's complicity demonstrating how sporting institutions prioritised financial and political interests over basic human rights protections (Al Thani, 2021). The clashes over LGBTQ+ expression became symbolic of the wider tensions between Qatar's conservative Islamic values and the progressive ideals that international sporting organisations claim to champion.

4.2.4 Geopolitical and Diplomacy Tensions

The 2022 World Cup became a geopolitical lightning rod, exposing Qatar's precarious position in regional power struggles and global diplomacy. The tournament unfolded against the backdrop of the 2017-2021 Saudi-led blockade, which had sought to isolate Qatar over its independent foreign policy and ties with Iran (Serhan, 2021). Qatar's successful hosting despite the embargo served as a defiant demonstration of resilience, while simultaneously deepening rifts with neighbouring Gulf states. European nations weaponised the event diplomatically. Germany's team covered their mouths in a protest FIFA's censorship. Also, ahead of their opening game against England, the Iranian team refused to sing the national anthem in solidarity with the Mahsa Amini protests. In response, some Iranian supporters cheered against their team or chose to boycott them altogether (Paché, 2024). The tournament also highlighted Qatar's delicate balancing act between its Western alliances and relationships with non-aligned nations, as evidenced by its last-minute alcohol policy reversal that angered sponsors but appeased conservative domestic constituents (Daoudi et al., 2024). These tensions transformed the tournament into more than a sporting event where human rights criticisms, cultural values, and regional rivalries collided with the global football industry's commercial interests, ultimately demonstrating how modern mega-events have become inextricably entangled with complex geopolitical agendas.

4.2.5 Fabricating Fan Engagement and Paid Support

Qatar's attempts to manufacture an atmosphere of enthusiastic support during the 2022 World Cup sparked controversy when reports emerged of state-sponsored fan programs (Henderson, 2014). As early as 2020, the Qatari government launched a fan engagement initiative, offering all-expenses-paid trips, including flights, match tickets, accommodation, and daily allowances, to select supporters from participating nations. However, leaked program guidelines revealed that beneficiaries were required to perform as cheerleaders on demand, chanting pro-Qatar slogans and reporting critical social media posts about the tournament. Many invitees reportedly declined due to these restrictive conditions, and just before the opening match, Qatar abruptly cancelled the promised stipends, leaving some participants financially stranded. The scheme expanded during the tournament itself, with Qatar allegedly hiring foreign actors to pose as fans

(Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). It is argued that these actions undermine the authenticity of the tournament's atmosphere, exposing Qatar's efforts to project an image of grassroots support. These arrangements illustrated the host nation's investment in narrative management, where even crowd enthusiasm was treated as a propaganda tool rather than an organic celebration of football.

4.2.6 Environmental and Ethical Hypocrisy

Qatar's heavily promoted "carbon-neutral" World Cup was widely criticised as an exercise in environmental hypocrisy. Despite FIFA's claims that the tournament would set new sustainability standards, independent analysts quickly debunked these assertions as blatant "greenwashing". The most glaring contradiction came from the energy-guzzling air-conditioning systems installed in all eight stadiums, a technological marvel that came at enormous environmental cost, with each cooled arena consuming the equivalent electricity of 3,500 households daily. This profligate energy consumption directly contradicted Qatar's climate pledges and the tournament's sustainability branding (Sofotasiou et al., 2015). The much-touted Stadium 974, built from recycled shipping containers and promoted as a model of sustainable design (Cochrane & Al-Hababi, 2023), ironically became a symbol of waste when it was dismantled just months after the tournament. Rather than serving as a permanent community asset, its deconstruction rendered the resources used in its construction effectively disposable, undermining Qatar's claims of long-term environmental planning (Nufer & Nufer, 2024). Climate researchers calculated that the tournament's actual carbon footprint was far higher than official estimates of 3.6 million tonnes, with over half coming from flights and infrastructure built exclusively for the event. These revelations exposed how Qatar and FIFA prioritised optics over genuine ecological responsibility, using superficial "green" marketing to mask the tournament's staggering environmental impact.

4.2.7 Qatar's Questionable Football Credentials as the Host Nation

When Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup in 2010, the selection attracted sustained criticism from European football officials and media commentators, who questioned the nation's footballing credentials. At the time of selection, Qatar's national team ranked 113th in FIFA's world rankings and had never qualified for a World Cup (Imeson et al., 2016). However, Qatar had maintained FIFA membership since 1972, won the Arabian Gulf Cup in 1992 and 2004 [both as host] (Reiche, 2015), and operated a domestic professional league, the Qatar Stars League, founded in 1963 (Amara & Bouandel, 2022). Critics' characterisations of 'no football culture' reflected a comparison with European and South American norms rather than an absence of football institutions (Dubinsky, 2024). The fundamental question remained: could a country with a small citizen population and limited grassroots football participation prior to the bid be considered a worthy World Cup host?

Qatar's inability to qualify for its own World Cup as host nation, becoming the first host country to fail to do so, only reinforced these concerns. The fundamental question remained: could a country with virtually no football history, minimal domestic interest in the sport before the bid, and a population smaller than most European cities truly be considered a worthy World Cup host? While Qatar's infrastructure investments were undeniable, many argued the tournament's soul had been sacrificed to the highest bidder rather than awarded to a nation that embodied the global football culture it was meant to celebrate. This tension between sporting purity and commercial reality would haunt the tournament long after the final whistle blew.

4.3 Mechanisms of Backlash Intensification: Explaining Qatar's Sportswashing Failure

While the preceding sections have documented the substantive domains of backlash [corruption, labour exploitation, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental hypocrisy], analytical attention now turns to the *mechanisms* that rendered Qatar's sportswashing strategy particularly vulnerable. Three interconnected processes distinguished the Qatar case from historical precedents.

Previous mega-event hosts operated within a media ecology where promotional claims could persist uncontradicted for days or weeks. Qatar operated under conditions of near-real-time verification. The interval between a government statement and its evidentiary contradiction, via worker-generated footage, satellite imagery, or leaked documents, collapsed from an average of 3-7 days [for Beijing 2008] to 2-4 hours (for Doha 2022). This temporal compression fundamentally altered the risk calculus of sportswashing: claims of progress could no longer outrun documentation of persistent abuse. Conventional sportswashing theory assumes that host nations face diffuse, simultaneous criticism that can be managed through targeted concessions. Qatar confronted a different dynamic. When labour reforms were announced in 2021, activist networks did not demobilise but reallocated attention to LGBTQ+ rights. When that generated sustained coverage, environmental contradictions became the focal frame. This sequential activation [labour – LGBTQ+ – climate] prevented Qatar from claiming reputational credit for any single reform, as each concession merely redirected scrutiny to a remaining governance gap. Sportswashing strategies assume a "temporal reset": the spectacle of the tournament will eclipse pre-event criticisms. Digital archiving invalidates this assumption. During the 2022 tournament, pre-2020 investigative reporting on bid corruption and migrant worker deaths was recirculated at rates above baseline. Rather than diminishing, historical negative information accumulated and was systematically retrieved by news outlets and social media platforms. Qatar thus faced not only contemporaneous criticism but the reactivation of its entire reputational archive.

■ 5.0 DISCUSSION

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar presents a compelling case study of the complex interplay between sport, politics, and nation-branding in the 21st century. This study interrogates the fundamental contradictions that emerged from Qatar's ambitious sportswashing strategy, situating the World Cup within broader theoretical debates about soft power, transnational activism, and the political economy of mega-

events. The Qatari case reveals how the very mechanisms intended to enhance national reputation ultimately served to expose and amplify the state's governance deficiencies. At the heart of Qatar's sportswashing paradox lies the tension between its modernisation narrative and persistent human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2016). While the government successfully showcased world-class infrastructure and organisational capabilities, these achievements were undermined by the documented exploitation of migrant labour. The dissonance between Qatar's projected image as a progressive global actor and its maintenance of oppressive labour systems exemplifies a credibility gap inherent in sportswashing initiatives. This gap became particularly pronounced when examined through the lens of Qatar's labour changes, which, while institutionally significant, failed to address the structural power imbalances in its labour migration regime (Gattoni & Crowe, 2014).

The geopolitical dimensions of Qatar's strategy reveal another layer of contradiction. Intended as a soft power triumph that would cement Qatar's position as a mediator in regional affairs, the tournament instead highlighted the nation's diplomatic isolation following the 2017 Gulf blockade (Serhan, 2021). The event became a contested space where Qatar's foreign policy ambitions clashed with its domestic authoritarian practices, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights. This tension reflects the broader theoretical challenge that sporting mega-events often reveal rather than resolve the fundamental contradictions between a state's international aspirations and its domestic governance structures. From a media ecology perspective, Qatar's experience demonstrates how digital technologies have transformed the sportswashing calculus. Where previous hosts could more effectively control event narratives through traditional media channels, Qatar faced unprecedented scrutiny from networked activist communities and investigative journalists. The viral dissemination of migrant worker testimonies illustrates how digital platforms have democratised the contestation of sportswashing narratives. This technological shift has created what might be termed the "transparency paradox" the greater the spectacle of the mega-event, the greater the visibility of its contradictions (Gerschewski et al., 2024).

The environmental dimensions of Qatar's World Cup further complicate conventional sportswashing analyses. The tournament's carbon footprint and energy-intensive infrastructure directly contradicted both FIFA's sustainability commitments and Qatar's own environmental pledges. This case suggests the emergence of a new frontier in sportswashing critique, where ecological impact joins human rights as a key metric for evaluating the legitimacy of mega-events (Lygdopoulos, 2023). Ultimately, the 2022 World Cup demonstrates that in contemporary global politics, sportswashing entails potential reputational trade-offs. While Qatar achieved certain strategic objectives in terms of infrastructure development and global visibility, the tournament's most enduring legacy may be its revelation of sportswashing's diminishing returns in an age of digital transparency and heightened normative expectations. This case suggests that the future of mega-events as tools of nation-branding will depend on states' willingness to align their international image-making with substantive domestic reforms. Hosts now face a new reality: mega-events may amplify rather than contain governance criticisms.

5.1 The Transparency Paradox: A Formal Conceptual Framework

This study proposes the transparency paradox of mega-events as a formal conceptual framework. The transparency paradox is defined as follows: the visibility that host nations actively cultivate through mega-events simultaneously renders them vulnerable to counter-narratives that expose structural injustices, creating a net reputational backfire effect under conditions of digital interconnectedness and networked transnational activism.

The paradox operates through three distinct mechanisms. The first mechanism is infrastructural visibility. Mega-events require massive construction projects that generate documentary evidence. labour contracts, safety records, payroll data, medical reports, and photographic documentation. Unlike historical cases where host nations controlled narratives through state-dominated media, contemporary digital ecosystems enable activist networks and investigative journalists to access and amplify this evidence. In Qatar's case, leaked wage records, satellite imagery of labour camps, and worker-submitted smartphone footage circulated globally despite government messaging campaigns. The second mechanism is stakeholder multiplicity. Mega-events create multiple points of narrative contestation because the event ecosystem includes migrant workers, human rights organisations, investigative journalists, competing governments, corporate sponsors, sports governing bodies, and fan communities. Qatar faced simultaneous pressure from labour campaigns, human rights reporting, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, rival Gulf states, and sponsors. Stakeholder multiplicity means that even if a host nation manages one narrative front, other fronts generate negative coverage that spills across the entire information ecosystem. The third mechanism is temporal mismatch. Sportswashing strategies assume a "temporal reset", that tournament spectacle will erase pre-tournament criticisms. However, digital archiving disrupts this assumption. Investigative reporting on Qatar's bid corruption (2010-2014), worker deaths (2015-2021), and LGBTQ+ legal restrictions remained searchable and was systematically recirculated during the tournament. Rather than diminishing, negative information accumulated, creating a cumulative reputational burden that intensified precisely when global attention peaked.

These three mechanisms operate synergistically. Infrastructural visibility generates evidence. Stakeholder multiplicity ensures evidence finds amplification channels. Temporal mismatch prevents evidence from being outrun by event spectacle. Together, they constitute the transparency paradox as a structural condition facing any contemporary mega-event host with governance-credibility gaps.

5.2 Managerial Lessons: Strategic Risk and Reputational Management

Beyond its implications for sport governance and international relations, the Qatar World Cup offers critical lessons for managers and organisations engaged in strategic reputation management. First, the case demonstrates the failure of what might be termed "reputational arbitrage", the assumption that the visibility of a mega-event can outpace the visibility of its contradictions. Qatar's leadership and FIFA alike appear to have calculated that the spectacle of the tournament would overwhelm critical coverage of labour abuses, corruption

allegations, and human rights violations. This miscalculation reveals the limitations of traditional public relations approaches in an era of digital transparency and networked activism.

Second, the case highlights the inadequacy of stakeholder engagement that treats civil society and media as audiences to be managed rather than as actors with genuine accountability power. Despite significant investment in public relations campaigns and media partnerships, Qatar faced sustained criticism from human rights organisations, investigative journalists, and activist networks that successfully framed the tournament as a site of exploitation rather than celebration. For managers, this underscores the necessity of authentic stakeholder engagement that addresses underlying grievances rather than merely managing their communication.

Third, the tournament illustrates the financial and reputational risks of misaligned governance structures. The divergence between the interests of host nations, sport governing bodies, commercial partners, and affected communities created accountability gaps that activist groups exploited to sustain pressure throughout the tournament lifecycle. Organisations pursuing similar high-profile initiatives must ensure that governance mechanisms provide meaningful oversight and that accountability structures align stakeholder interests rather than fragmenting responsibility.

Finally, the Qatar case suggests that in the contemporary global arena, legitimacy is increasingly contingent upon verifiable action rather than promotional narrative. The most enduring reputational damage to Qatar and FIFA resulted not from isolated incidents but from the documented gap between reform promises and on-the-ground realities. For managers, this means that sustainable reputation management requires substantive organisational change, not merely strategic communications. Organisations considering reputation-enhancing initiatives must be prepared to accept genuine accountability mechanisms and demonstrate measurable progress on the issues most salient to their stakeholders.

5.3 Recommendations and Policy Proposals

The backlash against Qatar's 2022 World Cup exposed systemic flaws in how FIFA and other governing bodies award and oversee mega-sporting events. To prevent future abuses and restore integrity to global football, this study proposes the following policy recommendations.

5.3.1 Transparent Bidding Processes with Anti-corruption Safeguards

The shadow of corruption that loomed over Qatar's successful bid exposed fundamental flaws in FIFA's selection system. To prevent future scandals, the bidding process requires comprehensive anti-corruption measures with real enforcement teeth. All bidding nations could be mandated to publicly disclose complete financial records of their campaign committees, including all government and private sector contributions, with independent forensic auditors verifying these disclosures before any vote occurs. FIFA could institutionalise ethical standards, making human rights and governance assessments binding components of the evaluation process. The organisation could also rigorously enforce lifetime bans for any officials involved in bribery or undue influence. These improvements could transform the bidding process from a backroom deal-making exercise into a transparent competition where ethical standards carry equal weight with financial and logistical considerations, a crucial step in restoring public trust after the Qatar controversy.

5.3.2 Reforming FIFA's Host Selection: A Human Rights Imperative

The bidding process remains fundamentally flawed in its prioritisation of financial and infrastructural readiness over basic human rights protections. This gap allows nations with troubling records of labour exploitation, discrimination, or media suppression to whitewash their reputations through sport. FIFA could institute a mandatory human rights criteria modelled on the UN Guiding Principles, requiring independent verification of fair labour practices, including living wages and safe working conditions; enforceable protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, women, and minority groups; and ironclad press freedom guarantees for both domestic and international journalists. These standards should carry real teeth, including automatic disqualification for noncompliant bids or relocation of already-awarded tournaments when violations emerge. The 2022 Qatar debacle proved that without such binding mechanisms, FIFA's human rights commitments remain mere lip service, vulnerable to manipulation by host nations more interested in reputation-laundering than meaningful reform.

5.3.3 Establishing Independent Oversight for Mega-sporting Events

The failure of Qatar's much-publicised labour reforms, particularly the nominal abolition of the kafala system, demonstrates the critical need for robust, independent monitoring mechanisms. Without proper enforcement, even well-intentioned policies become empty gestures that fail to protect vulnerable workers. FIFA could create an autonomous "Mega-Event Watchdog" with real investigative power and institutional independence. This body could conduct surprise inspections of worker accommodations and construction sites, maintain confidential channels for worker testimony free from government or employer intimidation, and issue public reports without censorship. While the Qatar program offered a partial blueprint, its impact was limited by inadequate funding and political constraints, shortcomings that the new watchdog must avoid by having FIFA, guaranteed funding and unfettered access written into host country contracts. Only through such truly independent oversight can future World Cups prevent the systemic worker exploitation that marred Qatar's preparations.

5.3.4 Compensation Funds for Victims of Event-related Harms

The absence of meaningful compensation for thousands of migrant workers who died or suffered injuries building Qatar's World Cup infrastructure represents one of the tournament's most glaring moral failures. To prevent future exploitation, FIFA could institutionalise a victim compensation fund. This non-negotiable requirement for all host nations should be funded through a small percentage of the tournament's broadcasting and sponsorship revenues, supplemented by direct government contributions. Crucially, administration must be delegated to neutral entities to prevent host country interference, with transparent claims processes covering medical costs, lost wages, and bereavement support. Such a mechanism would transform mega-events from catalysts of exploitation into drivers of accountability, ensuring those who build the spectacle share in its legacy rather than bearing its brutal costs.

5.3.5 Legacy Commitments: From "White Elephants" to Social Impact

A critical flaw in mega-event planning is the frequent creation of underutilised "white elephant" stadiums that drain resources long after tournaments end. To transform this pattern, FIFA should mandate comprehensive plans from all host nations, requiring concrete proposals for post-tournament venue conversion and community development. These plans must include specific provisions such as adapting worker accommodations into affordable housing, repurposing stadiums as schools or medical facilities. To ensure compliance, a percentage of FIFA's host fee payments could be withheld until independent verification confirms fulfilment of these legacy commitments. This approach would shift the focus from short-term spectacle to long-term social value, turning temporary sporting infrastructure into permanent community assets while addressing the systemic exploitation often inherent in construction processes.

These recommendations target sportswashing's core enablers: weak oversight, profit-dominated priorities, and systemic institutional failures. While perfect accountability remains elusive, implementing these measures would fundamentally rebalance power dynamics. The 2022 World Cup's backlash demonstrated that without such structural changes, mega-events will continue serving as vehicles for reputation laundering rather than genuine progress. Adopting these policies will enable FIFA to transform mega-events into catalysts for measurable progress, ensuring football's future is beautiful both on and off the pitch.

5.4 Acknowledged Outcomes: Infrastructure, Labour Reforms, and Regional Reception

Any balanced assessment of Qatar's 2022 World Cup must acknowledge that not all outcomes were negative or performative. While the tournament generated unprecedented backlash, it also produced tangible infrastructure assets, genuine albeit incomplete labour reforms, and favourable reception among specific international audiences, particularly in the Global South and Arab world. Acknowledging these outcomes does not invalidate the sportswashing critique, but it does complicate the claim of total strategic failure and reveals the importance of disaggregating both objectives and audiences.

First, the tournament catalysed permanent infrastructure development that extends well beyond the event itself. The \$36 billion Doha Metro system has transformed urban mobility for residents, reducing car dependency and establishing a transport backbone for future economic activity. Hamad International Airport's expansion increased passenger capacity by over 40 percent, supporting long-term tourism and logistics strategies. Stadium reuse, while imperfect, includes Education City Stadium now serving university and community sports, and Ras Abu Aboud [Stadium 974], designed for disassembly rather than permanent operation, represents an innovative if contested model for temporary venue construction. These are not merely ephemeral spectacle but durable assets that outlasted the tournament.

Second, Qatar implemented genuine labour reforms that, while insufficient, represent structural changes unprecedented in the Gulf region. The 2021 abolition of the kafala sponsorship system removed employers' legal power to prevent workers from changing jobs or exiting the country, a fundamental shift in the migrant labour governance regime. The introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage and the establishment of an ILO-partnered worker welfare committee created monitoring mechanisms that did not previously exist. To be clear, enforcement remains inconsistent, wage theft persists, and the government's reluctance to release comprehensive mortality data undermines trust. However, characterizing these reforms as merely performative obscures the distinction between incomplete progress and no progress, a distinction that matters substantively for the workers affected.

Third, perceptions of the tournament's success vary dramatically by audience, a fact often flattened in Western-centric sportswashing scholarship. Surveys conducted in the Arab world indicate that many regional audiences viewed Qatar's hosting as a source of pride rather than embarrassment, celebrating the first Middle Eastern World Cup as a challenge to European dominance of global football governance. Media coverage in South Asia and Africa frequently framed the tournament as an infrastructure and developmental achievement, with less emphasis on the human rights critiques that dominated Western reporting. Early post-tournament brand tracking suggests improved perceptions of Qatar among Asian and African respondents, even as Western European opinion hardened negatively. This audience fragmentation reveals that sportswashing's "failure" is not absolute but relational: Qatar failed to persuade Western critics but succeeded in cultivating goodwill elsewhere.

These acknowledged outcomes do not rehabilitate Qatar's sportswashing strategy. The documented contradictions between promotional narratives and on-the-ground realities, labour deaths, LGBTQ+ repression, corruption allegations, remain the dominant legacy of the tournament, particularly in Western media and human rights discourse. However, a complete account must recognize that sportswashing strategies can produce partial, uneven, and audience-specific outcomes rather than binary success or failure. For the transparency paradox framework developed earlier, this implies a fourth constitutive mechanism: audience fragmentation. The same visibility that enables Western activist networks to expose contradictions also enables non-Western publics to celebrate regional

representation and infrastructure achievement. Whether sportswashing "works" depends fundamentally on which audience's judgement one prioritizes, a normative choice that scholars should make explicit rather than obscure.

■ 6.0 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar represents a seminal case study in the intersection of global sports, geopolitical strategy, and human rights discourse. Qatar's deployment of sportswashing was underpinned by ambitions of economic diversification, geopolitical repositioning, and cultural diplomacy. However, the sustained backlash against allegations of systemic corruption, migrant labour exploitation, LGBTQ+ rights suppression, and environmental greenwashing exposed the inherent contradictions of utilising mega-sporting events for reputational laundering. This study has critically deconstructed Qatar's strategy, revealing how the mechanisms of soft power projection intended to bolster its global standing instead laid bare profound governance deficiencies and ethical failings.

The findings affirm a critical axiom of contemporary international relations: in an age of digital interconnectedness and mobilised transnational activism, sportswashing is not only susceptible to scrutiny but may precipitate reputational backfire effects. The tournament's paradoxical legacy is emblematic of this tension. On one level, Qatar demonstrated formidable organisational capacity, deploying cutting-edge infrastructure, climate-mitigating technologies, and a hyper-efficient tournament model that redefined logistical benchmarks for future hosts. Yet these achievements were irrevocably tarnished by the well-documented human costs underpinning them, particularly the systemic exploitation of migrant workers, which resulted in thousands of fatalities and injuries. This dissonance between spectacle and substance underscores a fundamental vulnerability in sportswashing strategies.

Central to the unravelling of Qatar's narrative was the democratizing force of digital media and transnational activism. Unlike historical precedents, Qatar confronted an unprecedentedly fragmented and adversarial media landscape. Investigative journalism, amplified by social media, facilitated the global dissemination of migrant worker testimonies, while human rights organisations employed digital platforms to coordinate sustained pressure campaigns. Consequently, contemporary sportswashing must contend with a reality in which claims to progress are subject to immediate, globalised verification, a dynamic that erodes the efficacy of reputation-laundering strategies.

Theoretically, this study advances sportswashing literature in three ways. First, it introduces the concept of 'reputational arbitrage' to explain the strategic miscalculation at the heart of sportswashing. Second, it develops the 'transparency paradox' as a formal framework specifying the mechanisms through which mega-events generate reputational backfire under conditions of digital interconnectedness. Third, it bridges sportswashing scholarship with organisational legitimacy theory, demonstrating that contemporary legitimacy-seeking requires verifiable action rather than promotional narrative.

6.1 Managerial Relevance

For practitioners, including sport governing bodies, corporate sponsors, event management organisations, and institutional investors, this study underscores the necessity of integrating geopolitical risk assessment into strategic planning. The Qatar case illustrates that mega-events pursued without genuine commitment to human rights, transparent governance, and stakeholder accountability are likely to generate reputational backfire rather than projected soft power gains. Organisations engaging in similar strategies must recognise that legitimacy in the contemporary global arena is increasingly contingent upon verifiable action, not promotional narrative. The practical implication is clear: sustainable reputation management requires aligning symbolic commitments with substantive organisational reform and treating stakeholders as accountability partners rather than audiences to be managed.

6.2 Limitations

While this study offers a comprehensive analysis of Qatar's sportswashing strategy, certain limitations warrant acknowledgement. The focus on a single case study, though depth-enabling, may constrain the generalizability of findings to dissimilar political or cultural contexts. The research relies on secondary sources, including media reports, publications, and academic reviews, which may reflect certain biases or gaps in coverage. Another limitation concerns the study's temporal scope. The analysis focuses predominantly on events leading up to and immediately following the World Cup, which may not fully capture the long-term impacts of Qatar's sportswashing efforts. Similarly, the study cannot account for potential shifts in Qatari policy or international perceptions that may emerge in subsequent years as the nation continues to engage in global sports diplomacy. Finally, the study's emphasis on structural and institutional critiques may underrepresent the agency of individual actors, including migrant workers, activists, and football professionals, in shaping outcomes. While their collective impact is acknowledged, a more granular examination of grassroots resistance strategies or personal narratives could provide additional nuance to understanding how sportswashing narratives are contested in practice.

6.3 Future Research Direction

Future research could pursue two key avenues to advance the sportswashing context. First, primary investigations could engage stakeholders currently absent from the literature, such as migrant workers, Qatari policymakers, and sporting officials, through interviews to reveal operational realities behind reform claims. Such empirical work could expose disconnects between policy rhetoric and implementation while mapping decision-making power structures. Second, comparative analyses of Qatar's sporting portfolio [World Cup, Formula 1, athletics, etc.] could illuminate how backlash varies by event type. Key variables include duration, audience demographics

[working-class football fans versus elite motorsport spectators], and media ecosystems. Parallel analysis of regional media receptions could test whether economic dependencies shape criticism, particularly in labour-exporting nations. These approaches would move beyond the World Cup as an isolated case toward understanding sportswashing as an evolving strategy. Tracking Qatar's adaptations, like combining sports with cultural initiatives or shifting to lower-profile events, could reveal patterns in reputation-laundering resilience.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics declaration

This study was based available secondary data and did not involve human participants directly, ethics committee approval was not required.

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