

## **Qualitative Assessment of Media Influence on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar**

### **Évaluation qualitative de l'influence des médias sur la Coupe du monde 2022 au Qatar**

**Yousseuf BALLAH YOUSSEUF**

PhD

University of Djibouti

Faculty of Sciences

Djibouti

ORCID identifier is 0000-0002-2376-7824

**Musa ADAMU MAMMAN**

PhD

Ambrose Alli University

Ekpoma Nigeria

Nigeria

ORCID identifier is 0000-0003-0756-3001

**Date submitted :** 10/07/2024

**Date of acceptance :** 10/08/2024

**To cite this article :**

BALLAH YOUSSEUF Y. & ADAMU MAMMAN M. (2024) «Qualitative Assessment of Media Influence on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar», Revue Internationale des Sciences de Gestion « Volume 7 : Numéro 3 » pp : 1030 - 1046

## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the impact of media criticism on the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with a particular focus on the French context. While Qatar, as the host country, is already at the center of debates, no contemporary edition of the global tournament has sparked as much criticism and controversy, in addition to concerns related to the organization of the event.

Our analysis is distinguished by combining an in-depth study of the content of French-language print media corpora with descriptive statistical treatments aimed at quantifying television audiences for matches involving the French national team during the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. To achieve this, we selected five newspaper articles for a content analysis and compared the television audiences of seven matches from the 2018 World Cup with those of seven matches from the 2022 World Cup.

The results of the first study identified seven main themes that prevailed in the content of French-language media, shedding light on the key topics of discussion surrounding the event. The second study revealed a significant increase in television audiences for the 2022 World Cup compared to the previous edition. These results indicate that despite numerous criticisms, the spectacle of the World Cup remains extremely popular. This research thus provides an in-depth insight into how media criticism influences the consumption of global football, highlighting the resilience and continued appeal of this major event.

**Keywords :** Media ; Print media ; Qatar ; Television audience ; World Cup.

## Résumé

Cette étude qualitative explore l'impact des critiques médiatiques sur la Coupe du Monde de football 2022, avec un accent particulier sur le contexte français. Alors que le Qatar, en tant que pays hôte, est déjà au centre des débats, aucune édition contemporaine du tournoi mondial n'a suscité autant de critiques et de controverses, en plus des préoccupations liées à l'organisation de l'événement.

Notre analyse se distingue par la combinaison d'une étude approfondie du contenu des corpus de la presse écrite francophone et de traitements statistiques descriptifs visant à quantifier les audiences télévisées des matchs de l'équipe de France lors des Coupes du Monde de 2018 et de 2022. Pour ce faire, nous avons sélectionné cinq articles de presse écrite pour une analyse de contenu, et comparé les audiences télévisuelles de sept matchs de la Coupe du Monde 2018 avec celles de sept matchs de la Coupe du Monde 2022.

Les résultats de la première étude ont identifié sept thématiques principales qui ont prévalu dans le contenu des médias francophones, mettant en lumière les principaux sujets de discussion entourant l'événement.

La deuxième étude a révélé une forte augmentation des audiences télévisées pour la Coupe du Monde 2022 par rapport à l'édition précédente. Ces résultats indiquent que malgré les nombreuses critiques, le spectacle sportif de la Coupe du Monde demeure extrêmement populaire. Cette recherche offre ainsi un aperçu approfondi de la manière dont les critiques médiatiques influent sur la consommation du football mondial, mettant en évidence la résilience et l'attrait continu de cet événement majeur.

**Mots clés :** Audience télévisuelle, Coupe du Monde, médias, presse écrite ; Qatar.

## Introduction

Qatar, a country with ambitious goals despite its small size (Boniface, 2013 ; Rookwood, 2019), has embarked on a comprehensive sports development project over the past decade (Abis, 2013; Srour-Gandon, 2013). This strategy includes diversifying sports sources, increasing sports infrastructure construction, and organizing international sports competitions (Wright, 2016). The country has also positioned itself as a major player in sports influence, with notable investments such as acquiring sports broadcasting rights by Al-Jazeera Sports and BeIN Sports in the Arab world, France, Spain, and the United States (Champagne, 2012; Verschuuren, 2013), as well as purchasing European sports clubs like Paris-Saint-Germain and AS Eupen (Srour-Gandon, 2013). These strategies have contributed to strengthening Qatar's image through "soft power" (Al Thani, 2021 ; Champagne, 2012; Peterson, 2006; Wright, 2016), and the advent of the 2022 World Cup has solidified its position as a host of top-level sports (Al-Khelaïfi & Boniface, 2014 ; Verschuuren, 2013).

In 2010, FIFA unprecedentedly decided to award the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar, attracting international attention and marking a first for an Arab and Muslim country (Abis, 2013; Griffin, 2021 ; Andersson, Bengtsson, & Svensson, 2021 ; Dubinski, 2024). This designation coincides with a period of economic transformation and diversification in Qatar (Srour-Gandon, 2013), offering a strategic opportunity to accelerate its economic conversion through the global visibility of the tournament. However, this transformation is not without opposition (Boniface, 2013), especially from countries known for being more democratic and football-oriented, thus raising geopolitical issues (Abis, 2013; Gaubert, 2017; Swart & Hussain, 2023). Hosting major sporting events allows Qatar to promote its international brand image (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, Galily, & Tamir, 2016 ; Al Thani, 2021). The repercussions of hosting the World Cup are manifold, ranging from political and economic considerations (Ghizlane & EZZAHIRI, 2021) to social, media, and environmental aspects. However, these double-edged repercussions can be a source of covetousness and controversies, including peripheral concerns such as human rights violations, environmental issues, and allegations of corruption (Hussain et Cunningham, 2024).

Hosting major sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, often generates strong interest among candidate countries due to the potential economic benefits for the host nation (Andersson, Bengtsson & Svensson, 2021). Previous studies document the local economic transformations in countries hosting these major events, while also generating criticism regarding the extravagance of public spending and social repercussions (Hiller,

1998; Preuss, Seguin & O'Reilly, 2002; Preuss, 2007). For example, analyses of the World Cups in South Africa in 2010 and Brazil in 2014 revealed similar challenges, such as social tensions and concerns related to public investments (Cornelissen, 2010).

For emerging countries, hosting mega-events is also a diplomatic tool that demonstrates their economic and managerial capabilities, thereby enhancing the country's image and strengthening national pride (Cornelissen, 2010; Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010; Carvache-Franco, 2024). However, research on sports "soft power" shows that host countries often face criticism regarding human rights violations and environmental concerns (Broudehoux, 2007; Pegoraro, 2010).

Like other countries that have faced criticism, Qatar has also faced reproach, perhaps more acutely due to the democratization and extensive media coverage of the event's preparation conditions. Social media, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information, has amplified these criticisms, highlighting the specific challenges the country faces.

Although criticisms are legitimate, few studies have explored the consequences of these criticisms on sports consumption in the European context. In the pre-2022 World Cup period, calls for boycotts emerged to denounce human rights violations and ecological concerns, creating a historical parallel with the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The event has sparked protest movements, while the media participates in an almost systemic lynching (Dubinski, 2024), contributing to shaping a often biased perception of the situation according to Qatar ([www.ledevoir.com](http://www.ledevoir.com), accessed on 05/12/2022). This innovative research aims to delineate the main dimensions of media criticisms, highlight cultural inadequacies and cultural shocks (Dubinski, 2024), and demonstrate consumers' independence from media discourse.

In summary, this research questions the impact of media criticism and controversies surrounding the 2022 World Cup in Qatar on the perception and consumption of this sporting event. What are the implications for future host countries of major sporting events in terms of image management and handling criticism? This issue aims to explore how these factors can influence the planning and communication surrounding such events, in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities for organizers.

To address these questions, an innovative approach has been adopted, based on a mixed methodology. This approach combines a content analysis of French-language press articles, which helps identify the main dominant themes, with a descriptive analysis of television audience data from the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. This methodological approach allows for an exploration of the relationship between media coverage and sports consumption.

This work is structured into three main parts. First, the initial part presents the geopolitical context and methodology surrounding the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Next, the second part examines media critiques and their impact on the perception and consumption of the event. Finally, the third part discusses the implications for future host countries of major sporting events, focusing on image management and communication strategies to address criticism.

## **1. Methodology and Materials**

The aim of this research is to assess, within the French context, the impact of media criticisms on the viewing habits of French viewers during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Before addressing this question, we compiled French-language press articles and subjected them to analysis (Study 1) to evaluate their content. Subsequently, to answer our research question, we examined the statistical data of the French national team's matches and compared them to those of the 2018 World Cup.

### **1.1. Study 1: Analysis of the content of written press articles**

The first phase of this research focuses on analyzing the content of articles from the written press published a few weeks (maximum three months) before the start of the World Cup. To select the articles for analysis, our main criterion was direct and free accessibility on the internet. We used the Google search engine with the keywords "Qatar 2022 and boycott." These articles, available for free and without geographic constraints, also had to be published before November 20, 2022, the start date of the competition. We read the articles to ensure that they addressed the desired theme, thus selecting five varied articles in length and themes. These articles came from differentiated sites, both geographically and thematically, including [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com), [www.footmercato.net](http://www.footmercato.net), [www.bonpote.com](http://www.bonpote.com), [www.france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr](http://www.france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr), and [www.huffingtonpost.fr](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr).

To be selected, the print media articles must first explore perceptions and opinions regarding the organization of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar within the French context. Then, these articles were progressively analyzed, from one to five articles at a time, until reaching the point of saturation, meaning that new articles no longer provided additional insights into the topic.

Our corpus consists of a synthesis of journalists' writings, excluding quotations. To analyze the content, we grouped all the articles into a single Word file, which we then submitted to the Tropes software for text processing and analysis. We opted for a conceptual analysis (Gavard-Perret and Helme-Guizon, 2008) to organize the corpus into a series of concepts based on the

most frequently used terms. Then, our objective is to interpret (Royer, 2007) these concepts according to the methodological procedures described above.

### **1.2. Study 2: Comparison of changes in television audiences 2018 vs. 2022**

The second phase of this research focuses on a comprehensive comparative analysis of television audience data for all matches played by the French national team during the group and elimination stages. These matches were broadcast by TF1 and beIN SPORTS during the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cup editions. By examining these data, we seek to understand potential variations in television audiences between the two tournament editions, as well as the factors that may have influenced these differences, including media criticisms and other relevant variables. By analyzing in detail the audiences of the French national team, we hope to better understand the impact of the media on the viewing behaviors of French viewers during the FIFA World Cup, thus providing valuable insights for our study.

## **2. Analysis of results**

### **2.1. Study 1: Analysis of the content of written press articles**

The conceptual analysis focuses on exploring reference universes, revealing seven predominant themes: "geography, countries, and territories," "characteristics related to the World Cup event," "sports and leisure," "communication and media," "politics and society," "individuals and social groups," and finally "behaviors and sentiments" (see Table 1).

**Table 1 : Themes and keywords obtained from content analysis.**

Classes	Classes of associated words	Themes
Class 1	Global (55), Qatar (109), Arabian Peninsula (116), France (103), Europe (151)	geography, countries and territories
Class 2	Other characteristics (33), certainty and truth (7), circumstance and context (4), colors (10), dimensions (26), position (15), possibility and impossibility (9),	characteristics related to the world event
Class 3	Games and leisure (19), competition (119), sport (34) football (80)	sports and leisure
Class 4	Communication (89), publishing (16), information (6) media and press (54), radio and television (21), social networks and the Internet (64)	communication and media
Class 5	Law and justice (34), emigration and immigration (5), organization (44), payment and remuneration (10), politics and trade unionism (55), security and insecurity (16), segregation and discrimination (5), work and employment (25), city and town planning (53)	politics and society
Class 6	Socio-professional categories (40), family and heredity (9), social groups (69), human (15)	people and social groups
Class 7	Agreement and disagreement (14), cognition and knowledge (34), behaviors (51), judgments and assessments (57), feelings (54)	behaviors and feelings

**Source :** Auteurs

Overall, the stylistic approach employed in the corpus of written press articles is argumentative, revealing a tendency towards critical orientation of the content.

The analysis of reference universes highlights, first and foremost, the importance of the "geographical" dimension (see Table 1). This dimension reveals a clear distinction between Europe and the Arabian Peninsula, encompassing cultural, sociological, economic, political, religious, and geographical dimensions. The European press, notably the French, seems to



exclude non-European cultural references, reacting to the emergence of Qatar as a leading football destination. This has sparked an unprecedented media phenomenon.

The second crucial dimension concerns the "characteristics related to the World Cup event." Terms such as "truth," "circumstances," "position," "possibility and impossibility" reveal a desire to denounce the conditions of stadium construction (Duval, 2021; Lamsiah & Bentalha, 2023), equated with forced labor according to Human Rights Watch (Fakih, 2022). The term "truth" underscores criticisms related to the human dignity and ecology of the host country.

The third major reference deals with the "sports and leisure" dimension, simply translating the central theme of the World Cup. The most frequently used terms, such as "games and leisure," "competition," "sports," and "football," reflect the inherent bias in the analyzed articles, focused on the World Cup.

The fourth dimension identified in the corpus concerns the theme of "communication and media." Parallel to the previous theme, it may represent a bias or simply reflect the media power ("communication," "publishing," "information," "media and press," "radio-television," and "social networks and Internet") of the World Cup. The media, utilizing all channels of information, played a central role in the media coverage of the global sports event.

The fifth dimension, "politics and society," reveals that the organization of the World Cup was the most politicized contemporary sports event. All subjects, mostly non-sports-related, such as law and justice, emigration and immigration, organization, payment and remuneration, politics and unionism, security and insecurity, segregation and discrimination, work and employment, as well as city and urban planning, were addressed. The media criticized Qatar on various aspects, contributing to discrediting the host country (Wright, 2016), thereby reinforcing the call for boycott.

The dimension "individuals and social groups" refers to workers, women (especially their rights in Qatar), associations (particularly those advocating for rights, such as LGBT+ rights), as well as international figures calling for the boycott of the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

The last dimension, "behaviors and sentiments," completes the series of identified themes. It highlights the often pejorative opinions and perceptions of opponents to the 2022 Qatar World Cup, emphasizing a tendency to make value judgments without contradictory debate. Considering these elements, one could anticipate a complete boycott of the World Cup. To evaluate the impact of boycott calls, a comparison of TV audiences for this World Cup with those of 2018 will be undertaken.

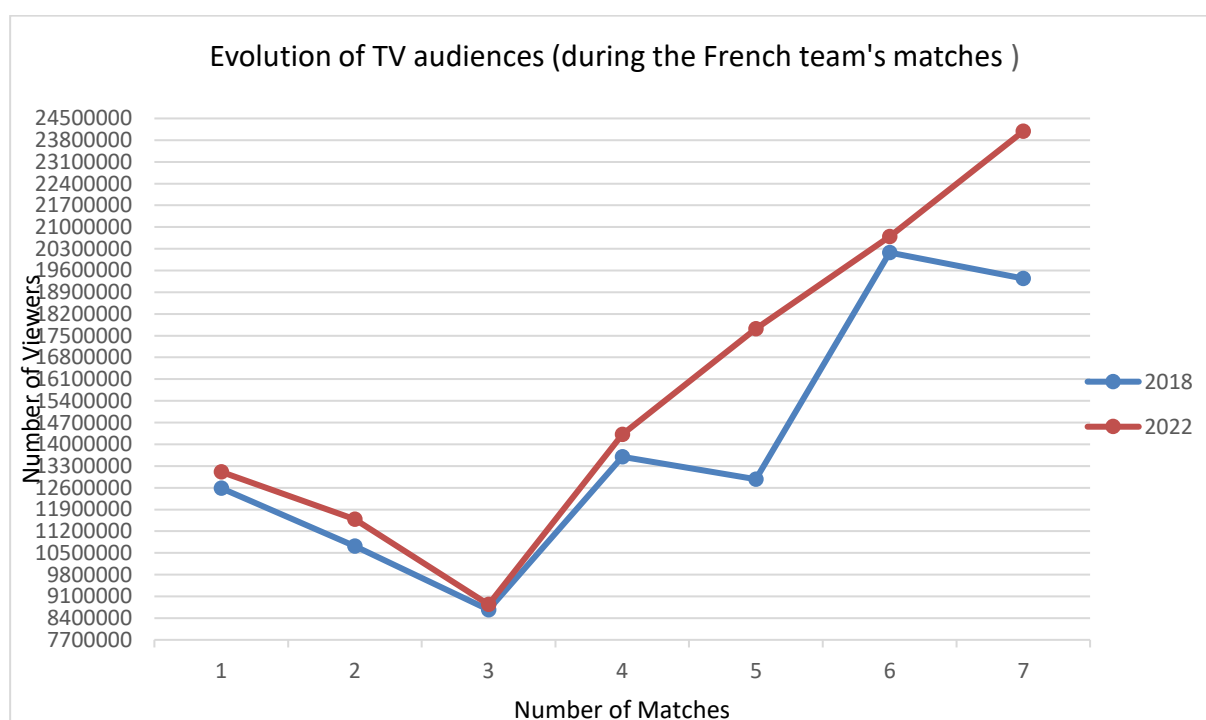


## 2.2. Study 2: Comparison of TV Audience Trends 2018 vs 2022

This study does not aim to detail communication survey techniques but rather to highlight the changes in television audiences for the last two FIFA World Cups, as published by Médiamétrie. The main objective of this study is to assess the impact of the announced boycott by European media, especially through the French-language print press.

In the first study, we observed a convergence of opinion among various European media outlets, particularly in France. These media outlets seem to have collaborated, according to impressions from Qataris (Wright, 2016), to erect obstacles against the host country designated for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. These media outlets consider Qatar illegitimate to host such a global event, advancing primarily non-sporting arguments. They notably contest the fraudulent acquisition of the event's organization by Qatar and categorize the country as lacking football tradition. This triggered a cascade of criticisms, even if some of them are peripheral to the sports domain (see study 1).

**Figure 1 : Evolution of television audiences 2018 vs 2022**



Source : Auteurs

Regardless of media and political currents, this second study provides a synthesis of the audience trends during the 2022 World Cup compared to those of 2018. The audience results post this World Cup are unexpectedly positive. TV audience figures have set new records,

contradicting the widely anticipated boycott effect. On the contrary, one might consider a 'buzz' effect that has significantly contributed to positive publicity for Qatar. Football enthusiasts did not hesitate to follow the matches, especially those of the French team. The data in Figure 1 indicates an increase in the number of viewers.

### 3. Discussion

The aim of this article was to assess the impact of French-language media criticism on the Qatar 2022 World Cup by examining its influence on the television consumption of this sporting event in the French context. The innovative aspect of this research lay in the association and combination of two investigative techniques: the analysis of the content of French-language press corpora and the comparison of viewership for matches in the last two World Cup editions.

The results of the analysis of the corpus of written press revealed seven diverse themes, highlighting their interconnection simultaneously. They offer an overview of the overall sentiments in the media landscape regarding the Qatar 2022 World Cup.

These seven themes form a coherent set, with the "geographical" dimension emerging as predominant, fundamentally testifying to the unusual nature of the World Cup venue. It is the first time that the World Cup is held in such a unique geographical location. The French-language press, in particular, accentuates the multiple differences, including geographical, cultural, sociological, and religious aspects.

This highlighting of disparities underscores the complexity of the event and provokes deep reflections on the impact of cultural and geographical diversity on such a global event. By highlighting these distinctions, the French-language press invites deeper reflection on power dynamics and international relations in the context of the World Cup.

However, this accentuation of differences can also potentially fuel tensions and divisions, as evidenced by the dichotomy between the "us," represented by the European written press, and the "them," consisting of Arabs or Qataris. This opposition, often amplified by the media, raises complex questions of identity, perception, and representation. The underlying mechanisms of this division reflect deep sociopolitical dynamics and complex identity constructions, as described in some previous research (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Youssouf, 2018; Youssouf & Lebrun, 2022).

Thus, the articulation between the "us" and "them" in this complex media context seems not only subject to debate but also difficult to untangle. These tensions and differences

highlighted by the press underscore the need for a critical and nuanced analysis of media discourses and their impact on the public perception of the Qatar 2022 World Cup.

The first dimension, "geographical," serves as the foundation for the six other dimensions identified in our first study. The dimensions of "characteristics" and "sports and leisure" refer respectively to the description of the World Cup event and the evocation of its content. Furthermore, the "communication and media" dimension occupies a central place in debates concerning the organization of the World Cup by Qatar (Le Magoariec, 2020).

The information, sentiments, and behaviors, notably of international figures and politicians, evidently had a considerable impact. This analysis thus allowed for a better understanding of the media onslaught (Hussain & Cunningham, 2024) surrounding this latest edition of the World Cup. Media, both local and international, played a crucial role in how this event was perceived and interpreted globally.

Indeed, the "communication and media" dimension acted as a catalyst for information dissemination, opinion formation, and mobilization of various societal actors. Media debates and controversies often highlighted deep issues, going beyond the simple sports framework, and influenced public perceptions and reactions.

Thus, by analyzing this dimension in the context of the organization of the World Cup by Qatar, we are able to better understand the media dynamics that shaped this particular edition of the World Cup. This also allows us to grasp the challenges and opportunities associated with managing the image and reputation of such a large-scale sporting event in the contemporary media landscape.

Assessing the impact of media frenzy on the popularity of the World Cup and the consumption of the sports spectacle is a crucial aspect of the research. In our second study, we undertook a comparison of television audiences between the 2018 and 2022 editions to better understand this complex dynamic.

The goal was to determine if media criticisms disseminated when attention was focused on the host country had a discernible effect on viewer participation in the event. The results of our study revealed a lack of direct influence of media criticism on the consumption of the sports spectacle during the 2022 World Cup. This finding suggests that television audiences are not directly affected by criticisms voiced in the media.

On the contrary, we observed a significant increase in television audiences (12.64%) compared to those of the previous edition in 2018. This increase can be interpreted as a sign

of the resilience and robustness (Lahrache, Fakir & Bennani, 2022) of public interest in this major sporting event, despite controversies and criticisms.

The interpretation by the President of the French Football Federation that the increase in audiences reflects the excesses of the detractors of the Qatar World Cup deserves thorough analysis. It raises an important question about the representativeness of critical voices in the public debate. Although those calling for the boycott of the competition may constitute a minority, it is essential to recognize and analyze their concerns, especially regarding human rights, governance, and transparency issues in the organization of the event.

Ultimately, our results highlight the complexity of interactions between media, public opinions, and the consumption of sports spectacle. They also underscore the need for a nuanced analysis of trends and factors influencing viewer participation in global sports events. This study paves the way for future research aimed at exploring in greater depth the complex dynamics between media, public perception, and participation in international sports events.

#### **4. Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be considered for an informed interpretation of the results.

Firstly, the first study focuses exclusively on the analysis of the corpus of written press, thus limiting the scope of conclusions to only written media and the French context. To increase the robustness of our understanding, an extension of the analysis to other types of media such as television, radio, the Internet, and social networks would be relevant. By integrating these different media sources, a more holistic view of the reactions and discourses surrounding the 2022 World Cup could emerge, allowing for a more global and diversified perspective.

Secondly, the comparison conducted in the second study is limited to television audiences for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup editions. For a deeper understanding of audience trends over time, it would have been beneficial to calculate the evolution rates between several editions of the World Cup. This would have allowed for the identification of longer-term trends, offering a historical perspective on the increasing or decreasing popularity of the event. Although the current results provide clear information on the success of the World Cup in Qatar, comparative analyses across multiple editions could reveal more complex patterns and influential factors.

In summary, these limitations highlight future opportunities to enrich the methodology and extend the scope of research for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of media reactions and audience trends related to the FIFA World Cup.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our qualitative results reveal that the World Cup transcends its nature as a sporting event to become a major arena for geopolitical issues. The in-depth conceptual analysis conducted in our first study, focused on a corpus of written press articles, has highlighted the various dimensions underlying this global event. These dimensions are mainly political, social, and media-oriented, reflecting multifaceted criticism.

Furthermore, our second study emphasizes that the enthusiasm surrounding the World Cup has surpassed critical discourse calling for a boycott of a country eager to join the global sporting elite (Chesnot, 2015). The record audiences recorded during the 2022 World Cup, despite numerous calls for a boycott, raise questions about the impact of these criticisms on the event. A legitimate question arises: have criticisms of Qatar not turned into a true media buzz around the competition?

However, it is essential to recognize certain limitations in our approach. The focus on French written media in the first study and the limited comparison between the 2018 and 2022 editions in the second study may restrict the generalization of our conclusions. For more in-depth analyses, extended exploration of the media and comparison across multiple editions of the World Cup would be necessary.

In conclusion, this research highlights the complexity and richness of the dynamics surrounding the World Cup, illustrating that beyond football fields, it constitutes a cultural, social, and political phenomenon of exceptional magnitude.

This study makes a significant contribution both at the managerial and scientific levels by examining the influence of media criticism on mega sporting events in general, and on the FIFA World Cup in particular. Through this research, we were able to identify and categorize the content of media criticisms into different themes. Specifically, the results of this study can serve as a guide for the organizers of major sporting events, helping them better manage, plan, and communicate around these events.

It would be desirable for this study to open up perspectives for expanding analyses to other types of media to obtain a more comprehensive view of the media discourse surrounding this

World Cup. Similarly, comparative analyses beyond the 2018 and 2022 World Cups could enrich the understanding of the temporal dynamics of criticism and viewer enthusiasm. While the focus on French print media is relevant, it could introduce a bias by reflecting a single perspective, not necessarily applicable to other cultural or national contexts. Nevertheless, this study highlights the complexity of discussions on the role of mega sporting events, particularly in terms of geopolitical, cultural, social, economic, and environmental aspects.

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