

Sport Journalism Practices on Instagram: How Sports Journalists From Nine Countries Covered the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar

Patrick Pfordt,¹ Christiana Schallhorn,² and Karin Boczek¹

¹Department of Journalism, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU), Eichstätt, Germany;

²Institute of Sport Science, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, Germany

As Instagram becomes an increasingly important platform for digital sports journalism, particularly among younger audiences, this study examines how sports outlets covered the 2022 FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup in Qatar on Instagram. The analysis focuses on 7,612 Instagram posts from outlets in nine countries across four continents (Argentina, Brazil, England, Germany, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Spain, South Korea, and the United States). A quantitative content analysis investigated how sports journalism practices have evolved and how frequently critical issues—especially those related to sportswashing—were addressed. A complementary qualitative analysis explored how these topics were presented. Critical reporting, including coverage of human rights, appeared early in the tournament but represented only a small portion of the overall coverage. Most posts emphasized match results, fan culture, and atmosphere. The findings suggest that sports journalism practices on Instagram largely prioritize the sporting event itself over political or ethical issues. Consequently, the platform’s potential to foster critical public discourse remains limited.

Keywords: digital journalism, platform affordances, football, soccer, sportswashing

The digital media landscape, shaped by the global reach of media broadcasts and the widespread availability of social media, has significantly increased the visibility of news worldwide. Digital journalism plays a central role in this development, as social media has become a primary channel through which large segments of the public—especially younger audiences—consume news (Newman et al., 2025). This trend is equally evident in the field of sports journalism, where social media platforms have become key outlets for reporting. A study by Oelrichs and Ludwig (2025) highlights that Instagram is the most frequently used source among young adults for accessing sports-related content. In addition, it shows that information is by far the most important gratification sought when engaging with sports journalistic Instagram channels. However, how sports journalism practices look on Instagram is understudied. This gap is particularly relevant given the long-standing perception of sports journalism as a marginal or entertainment-oriented field. Sports journalism has historically been criticized as the “toy department” of the news media (Hardin et al., 2009; Rowe, 2007). Although research has shown that sports journalism can engage with critical social and political issues, especially in the context of megasporting events (Cassidy, 2017), scholars have

argued that digital platforms risk reinforcing this marginalization by turning sports journalism on social media into “the new toy department” (Whiteside et al., 2012) or even a “toy department within the toy department” (McEnnis, 2020). This potential reinforcement of marginalization is especially significant in the context of international megasporting events, which attract global attention and involve complex political, economic, and societal dimensions.

Within this evolving media environment, international megasporting events such as the Olympic Games and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup continue to hold a special status due to their global relevance. Their uniqueness stems not only from their role as international athletic spectacles but also from their extensive political, economic, and societal dimensions that reach far beyond the sporting arena (Wenner & Billings, 2017). Through their editorial decisions—such as the selection of topics and the framing of content—also in this context, sports journalists play a crucial role in shaping public perception. In doing so, they act as mediators of national culture and identity politics (Vincent & Hill, 2013).

The 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Qatar, was one of the most controversial tournaments in the event’s history, with the general conditions in the host country being discussed in international media and in many societies long before the tournament began (Al Thani, 2021). Although Western European media and publics were particularly critical of human rights conditions in Qatar and accused the country of engaging in sportswashing by hosting the World Cup (Dubinsky, 2024), many in Arab countries expressed great interest and pride in being the first Arab nation to host the tournament and showcase themselves to the world (Abdulrahman Al-Emadi, et al., 2025). For countries seeking to actively shape international perceptions, hosting a megasporting event offers a highly visible opportunity to project favorable narratives on the global stage (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000; Zeng et al., 2011). In Qatar’s case, however, this opportunity unfolded in a media environment already characterized by intense

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Schallhorn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1564-2658>

Boczek (karin.boczek@ku.de) is corresponding author,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1516-4094>

international attention and predominantly critical, issue-driven framings. Accordingly, megasporting events are strategically used by host countries to enhance their international image—an objective that is, in fact, shared by all hosts.

However, the responsibility ultimately lies with sports journalists in each country to determine which impressions, images, and aspects of the host nation and event are conveyed to the audience. Their choices shape public perception and influence how both domestic and international audiences understand and interpret the significance of the event.

This article compares the Instagram coverage of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar by sports journalism outlets from nine countries across four continents and draws conclusions about the extent to which critical perspectives—particularly those related to human rights and accusations of sportswashing—were included, as well as how national contexts influenced the framing of the tournament. Building on this, the study examines two interrelated aspects of media coverage. It investigates general reporting patterns on Instagram, focusing on platform logics (Research Questions 1–2), which provide the context for the second aspect: analyzing the global coverage of the World Cup, categorizing content as sport-related, critical, or noncritical (Research Questions 3–6) to reveal how the event was framed across different contexts. By doing so, this paper advances the understanding of sports journalism practices on social media and contributes to the body of research on coverage of megasporting events.

Instagram Journalism Practices: Platform Affordances Encouraging Visuals

Social media platforms are increasingly important for news use. The 2025 Reuters Digital Report found that social media has the highest share of people saying it is their main gateway to news (Newman et al., 2025). Whereas the use for news on platforms like Facebook or X is decreasing, this value is rising for visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Newman et al., 2025). The proportion of people paying attention to mainstream news outlets/mainstream journalists on Instagram is 43%, only secondary to Twitter/X (48%) and Facebook (44%). Instagram is especially popular within younger age groups in shaping their view of the world (Newman et al., 2025).

Due to its affordances, which limit what users can and cannot do on the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), Instagram has a special focus on photo and video content, making it especially suitable for sports content. Whereas Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are more dominated by text and links, Instagram forces users to upload photos or videos in posts. There is scholarly debate about how these platform affordances result in platform logics. Platform logic, also described as “social media logic” (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) or “network media logic” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), would be distinct patterns of how communication looks on social media platforms. Platform logics could dominate the way journalistic content is designed, or media logics, shaped in the preplatform era by mass-media affordances, could prevail with slight adaptations to platform affordances (for discussion see, e.g., Hase et al., 2023).

Given Instagram’s growing role as a news source and its emphasis on visual storytelling, it has become an increasingly important platform for sports journalism. However, while sports coverage on text-heavy platforms such as Twitter/X and Facebook has been studied (e.g., Nölleke et al., 2017; Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022), research on how sports journalism operates on Instagram

remains limited. Analytical approaches are particularly rare and, when conducted, tend to focus on specific aspects such as the framing of female athletes (Johnson et al., 2022; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Tiriyaki, 2024). Further, little is known about how newsrooms in different countries adapt to platform-specific affordances or whether journalistic logic varies across national contexts. Thus, a study analyzing journalistic practices on Instagram using a specific global news event as a case seemed worthwhile and valuable.

Journalistic Coverage of the Host Countries of Megasporting Events

That host countries organize megasporting events for strategic reasons in order to gain international attention, present themselves in a positive light, improve their international relations, and boost their economy (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000; Gripsrud et al., 2010; Grix et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2011) is a widely held view (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Theoretically, this idea is described by the concept of *soft power*. It means that hosting megasporting events can be seen as a “strategy of foreign policy to improve the country’s power position internationally” (Almeida et al., 2014, p. 271). The prerequisite for this is that the culture, values, and politics are portrayed positively by the media (Nye, 2008), which has largely been the case with megasporting events to date.

Until the early 2000s, there were only a few studies (Gripsrud et al., 2010; Hede, 2005; Rivenburgh, 1992) investigating the impact of media coverage of sport events and its impact on the audience. But since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, interest in researching the relationship between coverage of megasporting events and the image of the host country has increased significantly (e.g., Beijing Olympics 2008; Gao, 2010; Heslop et al., 2013; Jiang, 2013; Kim et al., 2014; Manzenreiter, 2010; Zeng et al., 2011). This heralded a new era in country image research, mainly based on journalistic coverage in traditional media such as TV or newspapers. Since then, research has increased into how journalists portrayed the host country in their respective countries and what image has been shaped as a result.

Cross-event empirical findings indicate that traditional media outlets, including television and newspapers, tended to portray the host country in a generally favorable way. In particular, people, culture, and nature are presented in a positive light almost without exception. Extra reports (such as documentaries and travel reports) are often produced as part of pre- and postreporting to emphasize the historical and cultural characteristics of the country (Stiehler & Marr, 2003). Further, live reporting from onsite makes the population appear friendly and welcoming (e.g., Gao, 2010; Schallhorn & Häußinger, 2019). Criticism tends to concern mainly political issues such as restrictions on freedom of speech and the press; human rights (Beck, 2017; Gao, 2010); and socioeconomic dimensions such as poverty, safety, and poor social systems (Hammett, 2011; Kastrinos et al., 2018; Van den Broucke & Gama Gato, 2018). However, it is noticeable that, although the criticism is very visible in the media coverage in the weeks leading up to the event, it largely falls silent or is marginalized once the competitions begin (Hutchings et al., 2015; Manzenreiter, 2010; Schallhorn, 2019; Zeng et al., 2011). Overall, the empirical evidence from these years and events indicates that media coverage of host countries was predominantly positive, thereby supporting the concept of soft power, which suggests that cultural influences—such as sport as a cultural asset—can enhance a country’s international image.

However, the lens through which such major sporting events are viewed has changed with the announcement that the 2022

World Cup has been awarded to Qatar. Since then, a new term has become established, initially in nongovernmental organizations, but now also in the scientific community: *sportswashing*. Bergkvist and Skeiseid (2024) define sportswashing “as the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information” (p. 1091), yet the concept remains relatively new and is discussed in academia with increasing complexity (for a broader discussion, see Skey, 2023). The decisive factor is that Qatar, as the future host, had faced sustained criticism since the announcement—particularly from Western countries. For the first time, critical reporting about a host nation of a FIFA World Cup was continuously present in Western media for several years prior to the tournament, reaching an unprecedented intensity across both traditional and social media platforms (Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2025; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016; Swart & Hussain, 2023). Early coverage portrayed Qatar largely in a negative light, especially in Western Europe, with human rights violations dominating the narrative and overshadowing more favorable portrayals of the country’s cultural and economic dimensions. Focusing on media coverage during the tournament, Daoudi et al. (2026) identify similar patterns, demonstrating stark contrasts between Western outlets and Al Jazeera in both thematic focus and emotional tone. Their findings highlight how cultural and editorial contexts shaped narratives around the Qatar World Cup—an issue that remains largely unexplored for platform-specific sports journalism on Instagram.

Research Gap and Research Questions

To date, there is only a limited number of studies examining sports journalism practices on Instagram—despite the platform being one of the most frequently used sources of information among young adults (Oelrichs & Ludwig, 2025). Moreover, comparative cross-national research on the coverage of the same sporting event remains relatively rare (e.g., Abdul Rehman & Jebril, 2025; Daoudi et al., 2026; Gutierrez et al., 2021). Most existing studies examine media coverage of a given event in only one country at a time—for instance, Germany (e.g., Schallhorn, 2019) or the United States (e.g., Kodrich, 2017) during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. Although these studies point in a similar direction, suggesting comparable patterns in reporting and framing, their findings are difficult to compare directly due to differences in methodological approaches, coding schemes, and operationalizations. This highlights the need for systematic, cross-national research using a consistent framework—an approach that this study adopts for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. By examining both general reporting patterns on Instagram and the global coverage of the tournament, the study advances the understanding of sports journalism practices on social media and contributes to research on the coverage of megasporting events.

Building on this, the study addresses the following research questions, with a brief note on how each is operationalized:

RQ1: How do sports journalism outlets adapt to Instagram’s platform affordances? (Examining posting patterns—number of photos, slides, and videos; quantitative)

RQ2: How are Instagram posting patterns related to the outlets’ legacy media type? (Examining links between traditional media origin and Instagram practices; quantitative)

RQ3: What proportion of World Cup-related Instagram posts from sports outlets conveys a critical perspective on the event or its host country? (Examining the overall number of critical posts; quantitative)

RQ4: How does the distribution of critical posts change over the course of the tournament? (Examining temporal patterns in critical reporting; quantitative)

RQ5: Which topics are covered in critical posts, and which topics are highlighted in noncritical coverage of the host country? (Exploring thematic patterns; qualitative)

RQ6: How are critical topics distributed across different countries’ sports journalism Instagram channels? (Exploring country-specific emphasis on critical issues; qualitative)

Method

Data Set and Procedure

The analysis focused on Instagram posts from sports outlets in nine countries across four continents that participated in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. To capture the entire event period relevant to all time zones of the accounts examined, the study time frame spans from 24 hr before the opening match kickoff (November 20, 2022, 4 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time [GMT]) to 24 hr after the final whistle of the final match (December 18, 2022, 6 p.m. GMT). This results in a study period from November 19, 2022, 4 p.m. GMT to December 19, 2022, 6 p.m. GMT for all accounts.

Sample

To ensure a comparable level of interest in the tournament across the selected outlets, the sample was chosen based on a prioritization of criteria. The primary criterion was participation in the 2022 World Cup as this influences reporting volume. Second, we aimed for continental diversity. Further selection considered Instagram usage, follower size of major sport journalism accounts, and media system type. Within these constraints, countries were chosen to balance diversity and data availability.

Compulsory criteria:

- Participation of the national team in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and
- At least one country from the continents of Europe, Africa, Asia, North America, and South America.

Noncompulsory criteria depending on data availability (varying between continents):

- Success in previous football tournaments (number of titles at World Cups or continental championships [e.g., Africa Cup] prioritizing the number of titles in the highest tournament),
- Varying media systems according to Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2011),
- Instagram usage in the country according to the Digital News Report 2023 of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2023), and
- Instagram accounts of national sports media that could be suitable for analysis (journalistic content, scope, and posting frequency).

Initially, 19 countries were examined for their suitability for the sample. In the final selection of accounts for these countries, the sports medium with the most followers and a national focus was chosen. If multiple accounts existed for a given country, the one with the highest follower count was selected. In Germany, @kicker und @skysportde had a similar number of followers; however, as @skysports was already part of the selection for England, @kicker

was chosen. Based on these criteria, nine countries and correspondingly nine Instagram accounts were selected (see Table 1).

Acquisition of Data

The website <https://exportcomments.com> was used to download the captions, numbers of likes and comments, and the exact publication date of all posts from the World Cup study period. The download was conducted in September and October 2023, when access through the website was still freely available, thereby trying to increase the transparency of the analysis. However, data access conditions have since been changed and reproducing our data extraction is not possible anymore.

All slides of these 8,790 posts were saved manually with a screenshot that was assigned a specific file name that matches with the post for traceability. All videos within the 196 posts that were analyzed with qualitative content analysis were saved as screen recordings. In addition to Instagram's automatic translator function, other translation software and, where deemed necessary, native speakers were consulted to analyze the posts. After data collection, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative content analysis (Research Questions 1–4) and qualitative content analysis (Research Questions 5–6) was employed.

Quantitative Content Analysis

All 8,790 posts in the study period were analyzed using coding instructions (see [Appendix A](#)). The downloaded dataset already included the information of whether a post contained a video (Variable 1), so this variable was not coded manually. In a first round of analysis, the coder recorded how many slides the post contained (Variable 2) and whether it was related to the FIFA World Cup (Variable 3). Quantitative content analysis was also used for the overall assessment of whether a post contained critical perspectives. Based on the coding process of Schallhorn (2017), a filter variable (Variable 4 [V4]) was applied to determine which posts met the criteria for further analysis (see Figure 1). V4 asked whether the post addressed issues related to the sporting events themselves or surrounding topics—either *critical* issues (understood here as normatively critical or problem-oriented coverage) concerning Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup (e.g., protests, bidding, and human rights) or *noncritical* topics (such as architecture, fan events, and stadiums). In a second round, posts initially classified as “Yes” or “Maybe” in V4 were examined more closely, and only those containing relevant content were analyzed qualitatively (see Figure 2).

Quantitative data analysis (Variables 2–4) of the 8,790 posts was done by one author, and an intercoder reliability test with a coauthor was carried out using 10% of the data (879 randomly selected posts). Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha. Reliability was high for Variable 2 (number of slides; $\alpha = 1.00$) and Variable 3 (World Cup reference; $\alpha = .89$). For Variable 4, reliability was lower ($\alpha = .66$), reflecting the more interpretative nature of this variable. In addition, only 2% of the sample contained posts with critical or host coverage, making a high Krippendorff's alpha more difficult to achieve for this variable (by contrast, Holsti's agreement was .98). Variable 4 functioned as a screening variable to identify posts potentially addressing host-related issues and to select content for subsequent qualitative analysis rather than as a final categorical classification.

As expected given the study period, a large proportion of the posts referenced the World Cup, whereas only a small number adopted a critical perspective or addressed the host country and were therefore relevant for the qualitative analysis. Accordingly, the initial data set of 8,790 posts was substantially reduced, resulting in 196 posts being included in the qualitative content analysis.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative data analysis (196 posts, Variables 5–8 in the coding instructions, which assisted qualitative evaluation) was led by one author, with the coauthors contributing to the assessments of the posts. Posts that contained criticism of the host country were analyzed by “structuring” that is part of Mayring's (2015) general qualitative content analysis process model. After an explorative phase, a deductive category system with anchor examples was created, which was adapted in revisions after several test codings.

Variable 5 was coded “Yes” if the post criticized the tournament and/or the host country Qatar. The points of criticism were then recorded in Variable 6 with open keywords so that it could later be organized by topics. Variable 7 was coded “Yes” if the post addressed topics relating to the host country Qatar that were not directly related to the happenings on the pitch. These topics were recorded with open keywords in Variable 8.

Results

Sports Journalism Practices on Instagram

To first address how digital sport journalism adheres to Instagram's platform affordances (RQ1) and whether posting behavior correlates

Table 1 Characteristics of the Examined Instagram Accounts From Sport Media Outlets

Country	Account	Followers (M)	Legacy media type	Launch	Broadcasting rights	Private/state-owned
Argentina (ARG)	@diario.ole	2.4	Newspaper	1996	No	Private
Brazil (BRA)	@tntsportsbr	16.1	TV station	2007	No	Private
England (ENG)	@skysports	11.3	TV station	1991	No	Private
Germany (GER)	@kicker	1.2	Magazine	1920	No	Private
Morocco (MAR)	@arrayadiatv	1.2	TV station	2006	Yes	State-Owned
Saudi Arabia (KSA)	@saudisportscompany	0.08	TV station	2021	No	State-Owned
Spain (ESP)	@marca	4.0	Newspaper	1938	No	Private
South Korea (KOR)	@spotv	0.2	TV station	2010	No	Private
United States (USA)	@espnfc	4.5	Website	1995	No	Private

Note. Number of followers on August 10, 2023, when the sample selection was decided, as given on their Instagram account. M = millions.

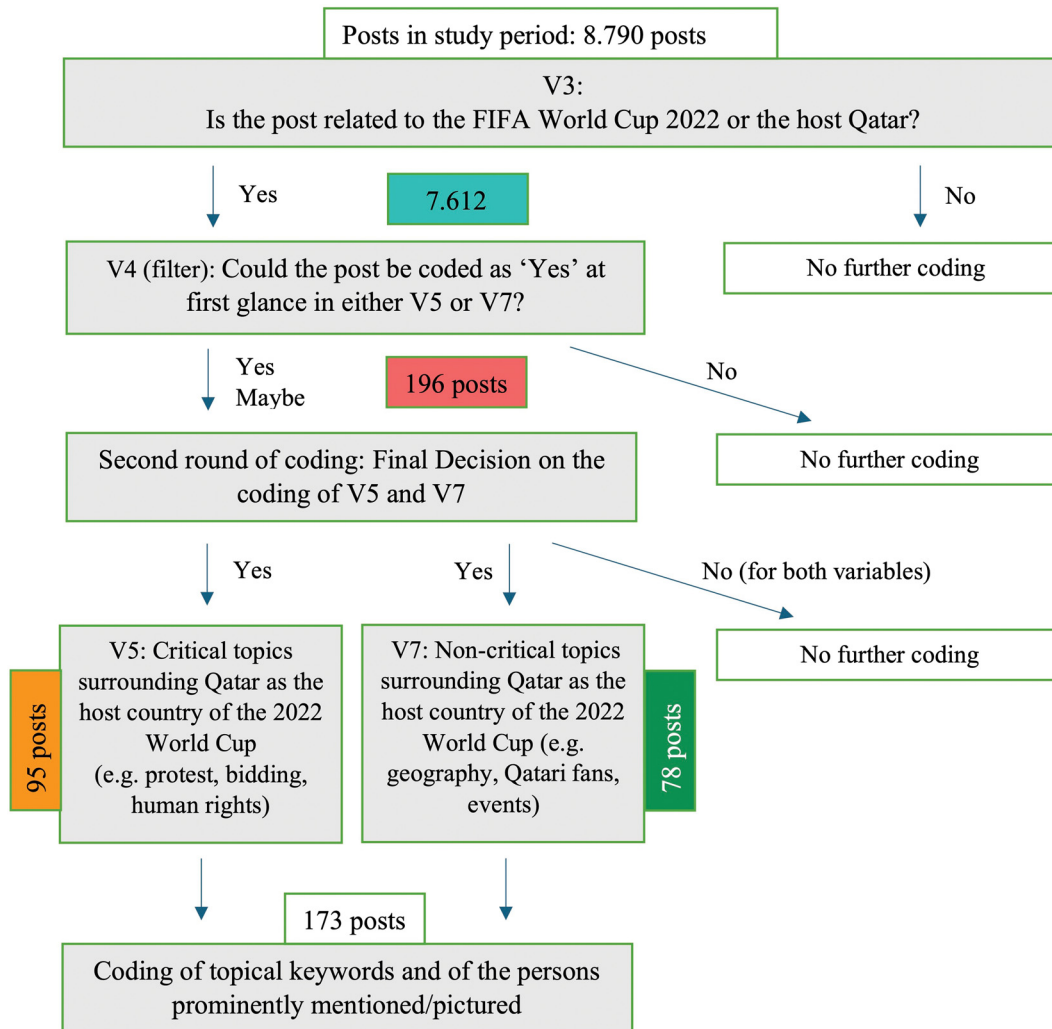


Figure 1 — Visualization of the coding and decision process. *Note.* The visualization shows the number of posts in the complete sample, those used for the quantitative content analysis, and which posts were analyzed further in the qualitative analysis. Colors correspond to Figures 2 and 4.

with the outlets' legacy media types (RQ2), a quantitative assessment of the data set was conducted.

During our study period, 7,612 posts on the 2022 Football World Cup were published by the different sports journalism outlets. The number of posts per outlet during the tournament varies greatly. Most of them were posted by the Brazilian outlet @tntsportsbr (3,152 post), and the least were posted by the South Korean outlet @spotv (47 posts) and the Saudi Arabian outlet @saudisportscompany (38 posts; see Figure 3). The huge differences suggest that no uniform pattern for sport journalism on Instagram exists.

Overall

Analyzing the different kinds of posts possible on Instagram overall showed that 75% (5,713) of the posts contained only photos and 25% (1,899) contained a video. The photo-only posts consisted of up to 10 photos. However, 90.4% were only a single photo, 6.6% had two slides, around 1% had three or four photos, and the share of posts with a higher number of slides is below 0.5% (Table 2).

To answer whether sports media outlets adhere to an Instagram platform logic or if their media logics prevail (RQ1), the distribution

of post types across outlets were analyzed. In contrast to other distribution channels, Instagram's platform affordances emphasize the use of posts that include photos and/or videos. However, due to the lack of studies, it is unclear whether sport journalism outlets adapt to these affordances in a similar way. Table 3 shows the posting patterns of the outlets in our sample regarding the use of videos and photos. Based on these patterns, the outlets can be divided into three different groups: outlets posting very little video content (Group A), outlets posting a medium level (Group B), and an outlet posting a very high level of video content (Group C).

Videos

Group A posts only a share of 4%–11% videos (Germany: @kicker, South Korea: @spotv, Saudi Arabia: @saudisportscompany, and the United States: @espnfc). Group B posts 20%–35% videos (Argentina: @diario.ole, Brazil: @tntsportsbr, England: @skysports, and Spain: @marca), and Group C is the outlet from Morocco, @arrayadiatv, a TV station posting 62% videos. However, we could not find any patterns regarding the heritage of the outlets with newspapers having higher shares of videos than TV stations (RQ2).

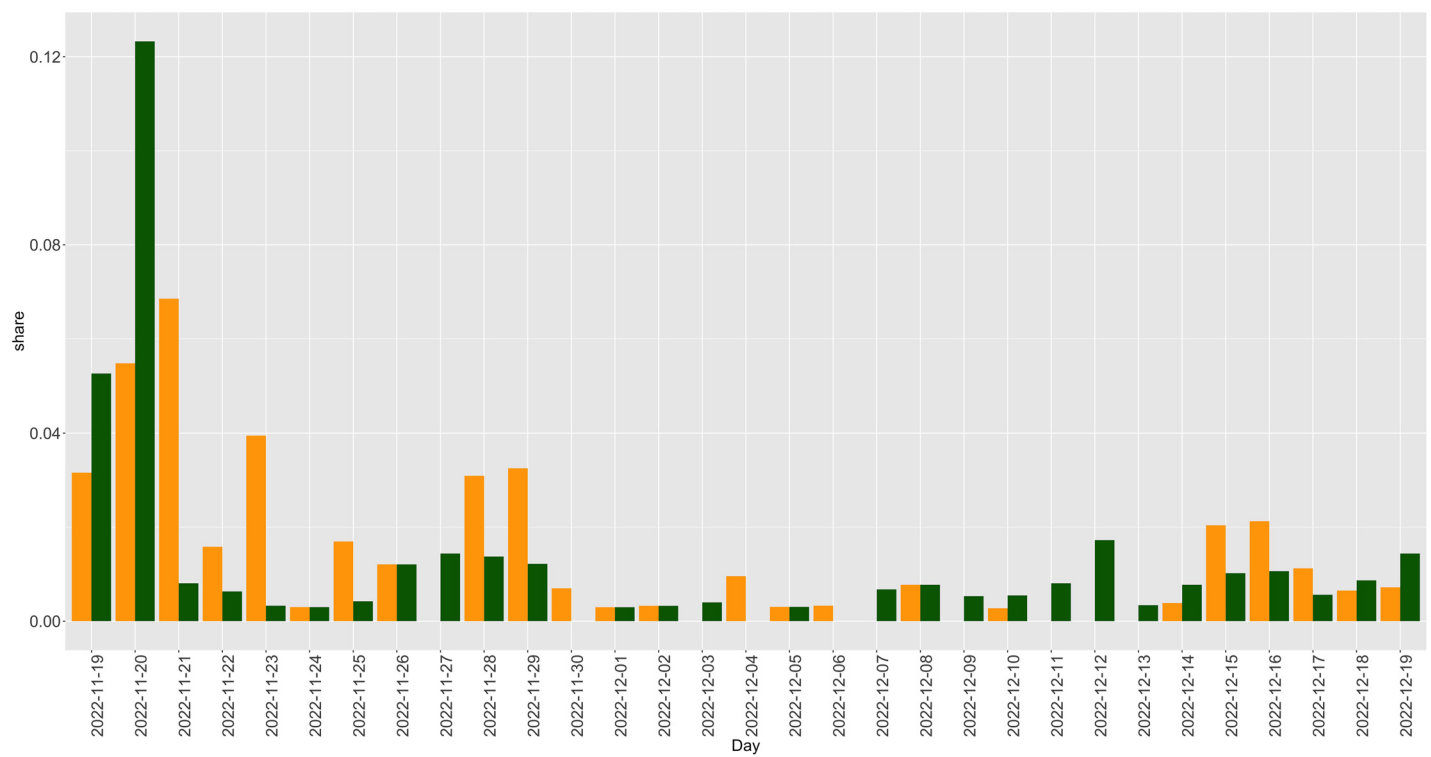


Figure 2 — Daily share of posts labeled as “Critical Reporting” (orange, left bar for each day) and “Noncritical Host Coverage” (green, right bar for each day) during the 2022 World Cup ($N=7,612$). See online article for color version of the figure.

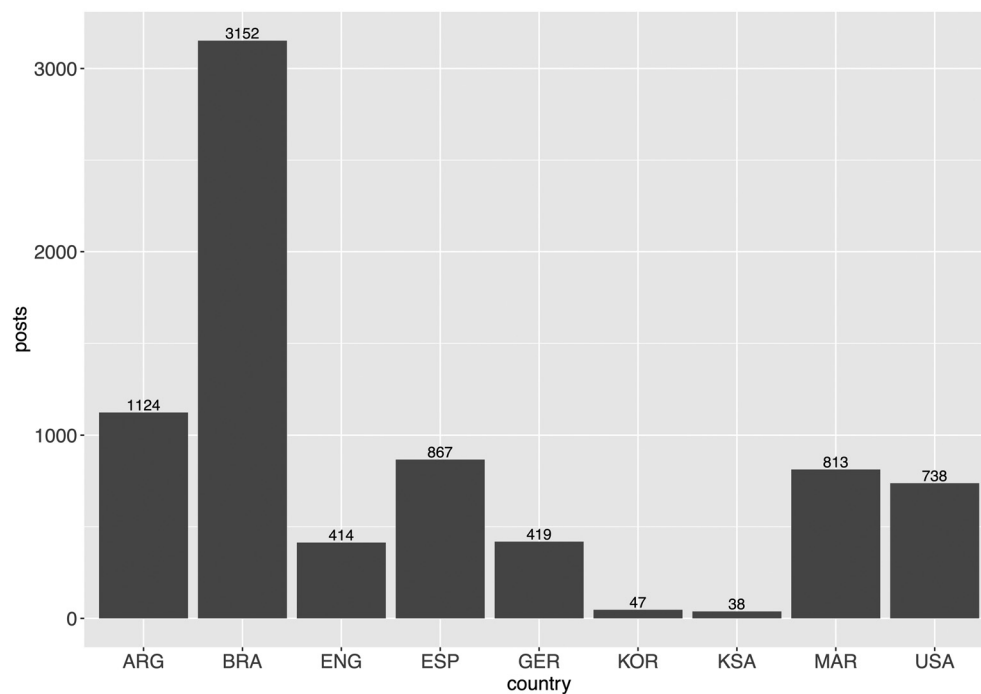


Figure 3 — Number of World Cup posts by outlets from nine countries.

Table 2 Distribution of Photo Post Slides on the 2022 World Cup on Instagram

No. of slides	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Sum
No. of posts	5,162	375	49	60	19	15	11	10	7	5	5,713
Share in %	90.4	6.6	0.9	1.1	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	100

Photos

Comparing the format of the photo posts, again distinctive patterns can be seen within the media outlets (RQ1) with four different groups of outlets (Table 4). Group A shares photo posts in more than 90% of the cases, with those having only one picture (Morocco: @arryadiatv, the United States: @espnfc, Argentina: @diario.ole, England: @skysports, and Brazil: @tntsportsbr). In Group B, the share of one-slide posts is between 80% and 90% (Spain: @marca and Saudi Arabia: @saudisportscompany). Group C is the German @kicker with a share of 76% and South Korea's @spotv posts only 34% of one-slide photo posts. Again, we could not find any patterns regarding the heritage of the outlets (RQ2).

Critical Perspectives of the 2022 Football World Cup

Proportion and Distribution of Critical Reporting

To address RQ3 and RQ4, a quantitative assessment of the data set, which comprised 7,612 posts on the competition (see Figure 4 for the distribution over the tournament), was conducted. RQ3 examined the proportion of Instagram posts from sport outlets that had a critical perspective on the 2022 Football World Cup or its host country, whereas RQ4 focused on how such posts were distributed over the course of the tournament. Of the complete sample, 196 posts addressed topics that directly or indirectly entailed a judgment of the host nation. These were labeled as maybe or definitely containing critical topics (such as human rights) surrounding Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup or noncritical topics on the host (such as architecture, fan events, and stadiums). All of those were added to the qualitative analysis. This category is 2.6% of the posts (RQ3). A closer look at the temporal distribution of these posts reveals that, at the beginning of the tournament, the overall number of posts going beyond pure football coverage was highest, declining toward the middle of the event and rising slightly again toward the end (Figure 4). Examining the share between critical and noncritical posts further shows that noncritical posts dominate the two first and last 2 days, whereas during certain periods of the tournament—often aligned with specific events—critical posts occasionally outnumber noncritical ones (Figure 2; RQ4).

Out of the posts filtered in the first round ($n = 196$), a subsample of 95 posts contained criticism of the World Cup and/or the host country Qatar (Group “Critical Reporting,” Variable 5), whereas 78 posts covered noncritical topics related to Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup, such as the opening ceremony, fan events, or

stadiums (Group “Noncritical Host Coverage,” Variable 7). Another 23 posts were labeled as reporting other aspects and were not coded further. For example, @espnfc reported that Iranian players were not singing their national anthem, which was a political gesture but not in relation to the host, FIFA, or the tournament (P1; see Appendix B for an overview of the posts mentioned in this section).

Then, a qualitative analysis was conducted to address which topics receive critical reporting or noncritical coverage (RQ5) and how critical content and posts on the host country are distributed across sport journalism Instagram channels (RQ6). This resulted in the following thematic clusters: treatment of the LGBTQ* community, ticketing, stadiums, and audiences for critical reporting; and excitement, atmosphere, local events, and architecture for noncritical reporting on the host coverage.

Critical Reporting: Treatment of the LGBTQ* Community

Of the 95 posts classified as critical reporting, most focused on the controversy surrounding the “One Love” armband. Several accounts reported that FIFA had banned the armband and threatened captains with a yellow card for wearing it, leading eight football associations to issue a joint statement announcing they would not wear it. While most posts reported the situation and reactions neutrally, some accounts criticized the withdrawal. For example, @tntsportsbr posted “SEM BRACADEIRA! X 😞 („No armband“)” (P2), @kicker shared a critical reporter comment (P3),

Table 4 Share of Photo-Only Posts Containing One or Two Photos by Outlet

Country	Legacy media type	One slide	Two slides	Group
Morocco	TV station	97.76	1.28	A
United States	Website	94.68	4.56	A
Argentina	Newspaper	93.14	3.04	A
England	TV station	92.99	2.21	A
Brazil	TV station	91.26	7.35	A
Spain	Newspaper	86.58	7.21	B
Saudi Arabia	TV station	85.71	2.86	B
Germany	Magazine	76.12	16.17	C
South Korea	TV station	34.09	34.09	D

Table 3 Share of Photo-Only and Video Posts on Instagram by Outlet

Country	Legacy media type	% of photo posts	% of video posts	Group	Sum
Germany	Magazine	95.94	4.06	A	100
South Korea	TV station	93.62	6.38	A	100
Saudi Arabia	TV station	92.11	7.89	A	100
United States	Website	89.16	10.84	A	100
Brazil	TV station	79.47	20.53	B	100
Argentina	Newspaper	79.09	20.91	B	100
Spain	Newspaper	68.74	31.26	B	100
England	TV station	65.46	34.54	B	100
Morocco	TV station	38.50	61.50	C	100

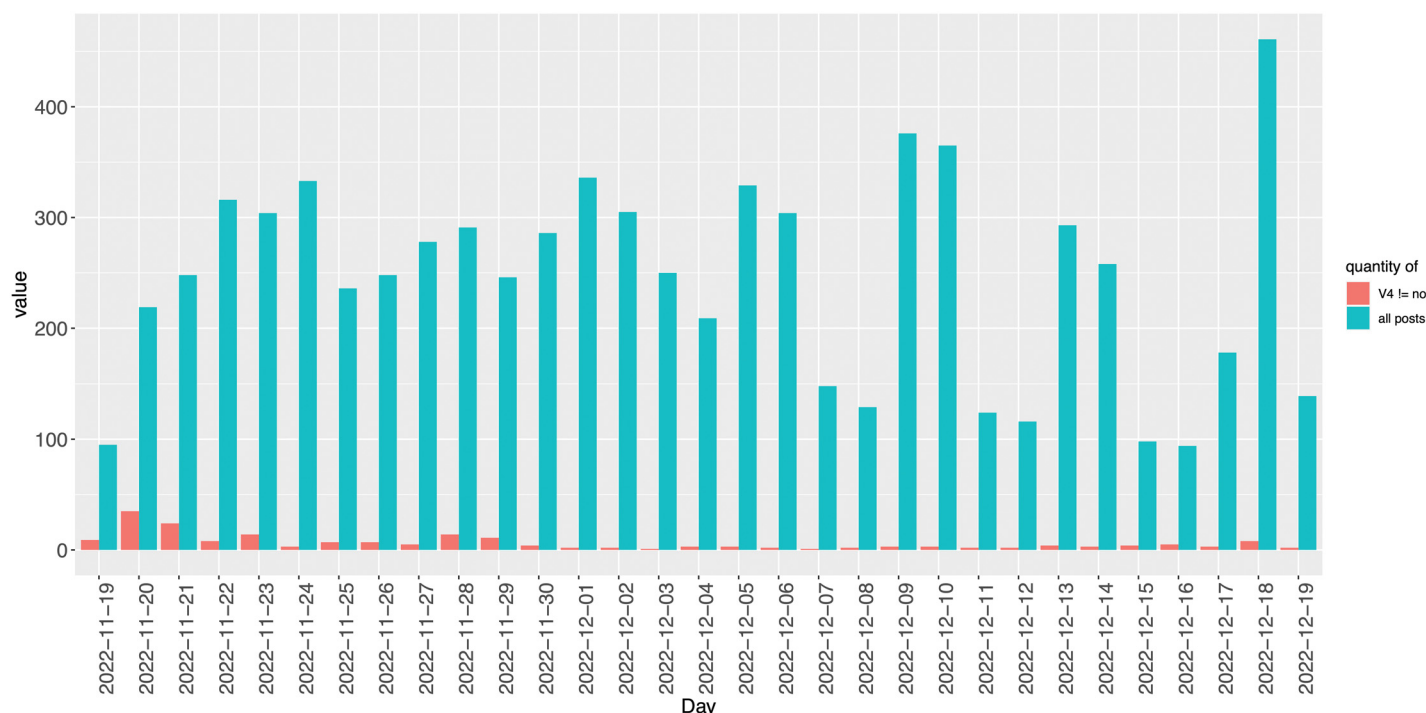


Figure 4 — Daily volume of all posts ($N = 7,612$, blue, right bar for each day) and posts addressing topics beyond football matches, including the host country Qatar ($n = 196$, red, left bar for each day), during the 2022 World Cup. See online article for color version of the figure.

and @skysports featured Jamie Carragher calling the decision “weak” (P4).

The protest gesture by the German national team before their first match against Japan (the players covered their mouths with their hands during the team photo) was covered by multiple accounts as well as other forms of protest against Qatar’s treatment of the LGBTQ* community that took place inside the stadiums. For instance, @kicker, @skysports, @marca, @diario.ole, @tntsportsbr, and @espnfc reported on an Italian activist who entered the field with a rainbow flag. @marca broke away from neutral reporting and showed solidarity with the activist by publishing the caption: “La imagen del Mundial 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿” (“The image of the World Cup”; P5). In addition, a fan of the U.S. national team was escorted from the stands for wearing rainbow armbands (P6 and P7), and U.S. journalist Grant Wahl reported that he was denied access to the stand because he was wearing a rainbow shirt (P8).

The examples show that Qatar’s role as World Cup host was critically assessed, particularly with regard to human rights and LGBTQ* issues. FIFA’s ban of the “One Love” armband and the subsequent withdrawal by several teams drew criticism, especially from Western media. Symbolic protests—such as the German team’s mouth-covering gesture and incidents involving rainbow symbols—were widely reported, often framed in solidarity, while exposing deeper cultural tensions. Overall, Qatar was not only judged as an event organizer but also scrutinized for its political and societal values.

Critical Reporting: Ticketing, Stadiums, and Audiences

Another area of criticism was the infrastructure and the organization around the stadiums, as well as the ticketing system. @marca reported insufficient ticket controls at the entrances (P9 and P10). @diario.ole and @tntsportsbr shared fans’ criticism toward a

shortage of tickets for the finals and high black market prices (P11–P13). For the opening match, however, multiple accounts shared photos that showed that many Qatari fans had left the stadium early during the match (Qatar were already 2–0 down after half an hour, which was also the final score), and some accounts expressed their disappointment: @tntsportsbr wrote, “Não curtiram” (“Not liked”; P14), and @kicker stated that this was a start that is not worthy of a World Cup (P15).

A good example of how different the reporting can be is the presentation of stadium “974” in Doha. @marca pointed out that the stands were removable and could be reused for other projects in other countries (P16 and P17). @kicker, on the other hand, only reported on the demolition of the stadium and refrained from discussing the special functions of the stands (P18). In another video, the presenter said that three to four billion euros were “wasted” on the construction of the stadiums and quoted an environmental organization that criticized the lack of sustainability (P19).

Beyond human rights concerns, Qatar was also criticized for organizational issues such as ticketing chaos, stadium access, and fans leaving early—raising doubts about its readiness, local engagement, and enthusiasm. Posts on infrastructure reflected mixed narratives: Some highlighted its innovative, reusable design; others criticized waste and poor sustainability. These examples reflect a broader divergence in media coverage between recognizing efforts at innovation and pointing out flaws in execution and planning.

Noncritical Host Coverage: Excitement, Atmosphere, Local Events, and Architecture

Overall, 78 posts contained noncritical topics surrounding Qatar as the host of the World Cup 2022. The coverage of the opening

ceremony already showed a tendency to which topics the nine accounts reported on over the course of the tournament. Those who expressed excitement that the World Cup was finally starting (e.g., P20–P22) in captions also reported the highest number of uncritical topics about Qatar: @tntsportsbr (26 posts), @diario.ole (P18), and @marca (P14). Together with @arryadiatv, they were the accounts that captured impressions with a team of reporters on site and posted them on Instagram. In comparison with the other accounts, they were more interested in showing the atmosphere, fan encounters, local events, stadiums, and the country's architecture. While many of these posts had a neutral tone, some expressed joy over developments outside of the stadiums: In the caption to a video showing Qatari and Brazilian fans performing typical national dances, @tntsportsbr said, "Isso é Copa do Mundo! 😊 Olha essa choque de culturas no Qatar!" ("This is the World Cup! Look at this clash of cultures in Qatar!"); P23).

@skysports (one post: P24) and @kicker gave little to no coverage of the opening ceremony and subsequently only very rarely reported on noncritical topics surrounding the host (Group "Noncritical Host Coverage"). The facts that @saudisportscompany did not report on the opening ceremony and that @spotv only shared a tweet by former Argentinian international Sergio Agüero (P25), despite the appearance of South Korean singer Jung Kook, were also indicators that the two accounts reported on the World Cup to a much lesser extent than the other accounts. They both had no critical reporting posts, and both had only one noncritical host coverage post. @espnfc, on the other hand, stands out, with six posts and thus the most coverage of the opening ceremony but no other "noncritical host coverage" posts afterward.

Overall, accounts that expressed enthusiasm for the tournament's start also shared the most positive or neutral content about Qatar, focusing on the atmosphere, fan interactions, local culture, stadiums, and architecture. By contrast, some outlets paid little attention to the opening ceremony and rarely highlighted positive aspects of the host, whereas others showed minimal engagement with the event overall. These differences may reflect varying editorial priorities and levels of engagement with Qatar as the World Cup host across regions and media outlets.

Distribution of "Critical Reporting" and "Noncritical Host Coverage" Posts (RQ6)

The qualitative assessment on the topics receiving critical and noncritical reporting already hinted at the distribution of critical posts across sports journalism Instagram channels within the sample (RQ6; overview of the results in Table 5). All but two

Instagram sports news outlets (@saudisportscompany and @spotv) published posts that were coded as "critical reporting" on the World Cup. In addition, @arryadiatv only conveyed criticism concerning their own national team—namely the performance of the FIFA and its referees (e.g., P26) and its ticket platform (P27).

Some sports outlets included coverage on the host in their Instagram coverage. The highest numbers of uncritical topics about Qatar were posted by @tntsportsbr, @diario.ole, and @marca. @kicker and @skysports did so less frequently, and @espnfc stopped after the opening ceremony. The seven "noncritical host coverage" posts by @arryadiatv covered not only neutral topics, such as the presentation of stadiums, the city, or Qatari fans, but also positive posts that explicitly praised the host country, Qatar. In two posts, a reporter himself praised the organization of the World Cup and its significance for the entire Arab world (P28 and P29), which reinforces the impression that @arryadiatv not only provided uncritical but almost entirely positive coverage of the World Cup and the host Qatar.

The distribution of critical reporting across the Instagram accounts in our sample shows notable variation between outlets and regions in how Qatar was portrayed as World Cup host. While most outlets published at least some critical content, the overall volume remained low and often centered on specific controversies such as the "One Love" armband. Western accounts tended to report more critically, particularly on political and human rights issues, whereas non-Western outlets often focused on sporting aspects or highlighted the host in a positive light. Notably, @arryadiatv emphasized national pride and praised Qatar's organization and significance for the Arab world. These observations suggest that media coverage of the host country can reflect broader geopolitical perspectives and cultural affiliations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined how journalists from countries across four continents used Instagram to report on the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with a particular focus on the extent to which critical perspectives—especially those related to sportswashing—were included in the coverage. As Instagram continues to grow as a platform for news consumption, particularly among younger audiences, it plays an increasingly important role in shaping public perceptions of major sports events. Sports journalism on Instagram combines traditional journalistic functions—such as informing and contextualizing—with platform-specific dynamics like visual storytelling, emotional engagement, and algorithm-driven visibility. This hybrid nature creates both opportunities and challenges for critical coverage, as

Table 5 Overview of the Distribution of Critical Reporting Posts and Noncritical Host Coverage

Country	Account	Critical reporting posts	Noncritical host coverage posts
Argentina	@diario.ole	Yes	Yes
Brazil	@tntsportsbr	Yes	Yes
England	@skysports	Yes	Rarely
Germany	@kicker	Yes	Rarely
Morocco	@arryadiatv	Yes, own team only	Yes
Saudi Arabia	@saudisportscompany	No	One
Spain	@marca	Yes	Yes
South Korea	@spotv	No	One
United States	@espnfc	Yes	Yes, opening ceremony

editorial choices must compete with entertainment-focused content to gain attention.

Our findings on the Instagram practices show, in line with previous research (for an overview, see [Hase et al., 2023](#)) that sport outlets adapt to platform affordances without fully adhering to a dominant Instagram platform logic. Instead, different outlets display in distinct posting patterns, suggesting that journalistic media logics continue to prevail to some extent (RQ1). The number of posts per outlet during the tournament varies greatly, with some posting every few minutes and others only in a daily rhythm. Regarding the relationship between posting patterns and legacy media types (newspaper vs. TV), our results indicate that these distinctions are less clear-cut on Instagram than in traditional media environments (RQ2). Although traditional media origins still influence certain practices—such as TV broadcasters publishing a higher proportion of video content—outlets originating from print journalism can adopt similar social media practices. This suggests that newsroom legacies, understood as historically shaped production routines associated with print or broadcast journalism, do not fully determine social media content strategies. Rather than indicating a general decline in the importance of newsroom legacies, this finding points to increasing convergence in social media practices or to a growing professionalization of social media editing across different types of news organizations. At the same time, this pattern may partly reflect the limited sample size as only one outlet per country was analyzed. Further research with a broader set of newsrooms is therefore needed to substantiate these interpretations.

Turning to the content of the coverage, we can see that, especially in the first days of the tournament, noncritical host coverage and critical reporting are significant. However, on most days, the game itself is the only focus of reporting. Overall, the analysis shows that critical reporting played only a marginal role in Instagram coverage of the tournament (RQ3). Although controversial topics such as human rights may have appeared prominent in public discourse, only 95 out of more than 7,600 World Cup-related Instagram posts contained critical reporting. This finding aligns with previous research showing that critical perspectives are generally limited in sports journalism, including in traditional media. Rather than indicating a platform-specific deviation, our results suggest that Instagram does not counteract this tendency and may even reinforce the marginal position of complex or critical issues within sports coverage. However, direct comparisons with traditional media were beyond the scope of this study.

In line with previous research on the coverage of megasporting events in traditional mass media ([Hutchings et al., 2015](#); [Manzenreiter, 2010](#); [Zeng et al., 2011](#)), the volume of critical reporting decreased over the course of the tournament (RQ4). As in earlier studies, criticism primarily focused on organizational aspects and infrastructure rather than on broader political or societal issues (RQ5; see also [Schallhorn, 2019](#); [Van den Broucke & Gama Gato, 2018](#)). What truly distinguished the media coverage of this World Cup from previous events was the intensity with which cultural values concerning sexual identity and orientation entered the global spotlight—ignited in large part by the symbolic power and political controversy surrounding the rainbow armband, which turned into a flashpoint for broader debates on human rights and freedom of expression. However, it was primarily Western countries that focused on this issue on Instagram, whereas non-Western countries concentrated more heavily—or almost exclusively—on the sporting aspects. Possible causes for these differences are diverse and complex. They may include geopolitical factors and broader dependencies

between host and reporting countries (RQ6), varying societal and journalistic traditions and regional media regulations, and intercultural relations and a stronger emphasis on national pride and sports performance. Future studies could explore these complex and multifaceted causes in more depth.

When broadening the perspective and incorporating current findings on sports journalism, various trends become apparent. A longitudinal study comparing sports coverage in print media from 2011 and 2021 indicates a noticeable improvement in journalistic quality. This includes broader thematic diversity; increased use of visuals; a higher number of sources; and longer, more in-depth articles ([Horky et al., 2025](#)). The authors interpret these findings as evidence of a shift in editorial thinking—suggesting that sports journalism in print has become more serious and professional, gradually shedding its reputation as the “toy department.” By contrast, the digital landscape appears to be moving in the opposite direction. Scholars have referred to sports journalism on digital platforms as “the new toy department” ([Whiteside et al., 2012](#)) or even “toy department within the toy department” ([McEnnis, 2020](#)). The data from our study seem to support this view.

Beyond platform and journalistic logics, our findings, reinforced by the outcome of the qualitative analysis, further support Rivenburgh’s (1992) argument that international media coverage often reveals more about the reporting country—its cultural norms, values, and issue priorities—than about the host nation itself. This dynamic is particularly relevant when considering the strategic use of international sports events as tools of soft power. If media in certain regions amplify critical perspectives while others reinforce celebratory narratives, the intended image-building efforts of the host nation may be either undermined or left unchallenged, depending on the geopolitical context. This also underscores the importance of further research into how these relationships shape media narratives in order to better understand and categorize the mechanisms behind the international perception of host countries—especially in the context of contested concepts like sportswashing. Although it was not the primary aim of this study to engage in a conceptual debate on sportswashing, the findings nevertheless call for a critical reflection on how and when the term is applied. The strategic goals behind hosting a megasporting event may vary significantly depending on a country’s political system, economic conditions, or cultural values ([Grix & Brannagan, 2024](#)). From this perspective, countries facing social, political, or economic challenges—or whose values deviate from dominant Western norms—may be at risk of being subject to sportswashing-related criticism. However, such criticism is not limited to non-Western nations; for example, the United States has recently faced criticism in connection with its hosting of the upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup, though the content and focus of this criticism may differ from that directed at other countries. However, such events also offer countries a legitimate opportunity to initiate development processes and foster progress across various dimensions. Going forward, it may be worth considering whether clearer and more transparent criteria and development goals for host countries should be established—both during the bidding phase and in the lead-up to the event—to ensure that measurable steps toward social or infrastructural improvement are not only promised but demonstrably achieved.

Limitations of this study include the composition of the sample, which comprised only one sports journalism outlet per country and focused exclusively on countries participating in the tournament in order to achieve a relatively consistent level of coverage. This sampling strategy inevitably introduces bias, as the coverage of a single outlet cannot be considered representative of

the broader media landscape or public discourse within a given country. As a result, observed differences in coverage cannot be unequivocally attributed to national or cultural contexts but may instead reflect outlet-specific editorial orientations within national media systems. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as general reporting patterns at the national level.

In addition, the lack of critical reporting within our sample should not be understood as a general assessment of critical reporting in a country. Concurrent events that were more newsworthy to journalists may have crowded out World Cup coverage, while poor performances or early exits by teams might have reduced audience interest, thereby also influencing journalistic coverage. Furthermore, our study was restricted to the period of the FIFA World Cup. Future research should also examine both pre- and postevent reporting to assess longer term narratives and consequences, as discussions often start before and continue after the tournament in traditional and digital media alike.

Despite its shortcomings, this study shows that sports journalism on Instagram tends to prioritize sporting events and results, while critical engagement with political or ethical issues remains limited. This likely reflects both the nature of the platform and the content preferences of its audience. Through a cross-continental comparative analysis, the study provides valuable insights indicating that, across all analyzed countries, Instagram's role as a forum for in-depth public debate on controversial topics remains limited. The share of critical posts is even lower than that of traditional media (Rivenburgh, 1992; Schallhorn, 2017)—despite social media platforms like Instagram having no restrictions on airtime or space. Accordingly, the role of sports journalism in social media warrants further critical reflection.

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Appendix A: Coding Instructions

Variable	Description (+ examples)	Range of values
V1 Type of posts	Does the post contain at least one video?	Yes No
V2 Slides	How many slides has the post? (On Instagram, a post can consist of a maximum of 10 slides)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10
V3 World Cup reference	It is coded on whether the post has a World Cup reference. A post has no World Cup connection if . . . • it contains advertising (discounts, offers, betting odds, competitions . . .); • it is excluded from this are recurring formats on the account that have a sponsor but otherwise only relate to the World Cup (anchor example: Twitch-Stream MARCA_2022-12-17_18_20_53_Pos01); • it focuses on a sport other than football; • it addresses women's football; • it addresses club football (including transfer rumors of a World Cup player. Anchor example: SKY SPORTS_2022-12-16_); • it addresses a U-national team (e.g., U20); and • it does not make any reference to a World Cup as a major sporting event, FIFA, a senior national team of the 2022 World Cup (including players, fans), referees of the World Cup, or the host Qatar. Only the posts that were coded with "Yes" in V3 are coded further from V4 onward. Otherwise, the coding for the post ends at this point.	Yes No
V4 Presorting	Presorting: All posts that could be coded as yes at first glance in either V5 or V7 are coded as "yes" or "maybe" here—depending on how sure the coding person is. "No" is coded when it is clear that neither V5 nor V7 are "yes" for this post. All posts that were coded with "Yes" or "Maybe" in V4 are reviewed again in a second round. A final decision is made for the coding of V5 and V7. For all posts that were coded with "No" in V4, the coding is terminated at this point.	Yes No Maybe
V5 Critical	It is coded as "yes" if the post conveys criticism of the tournament/host. This includes: • Quoting critical statements from people, media, associations, studies, and so forth (e.g., critical press statement from the DFB [German Football Association] and fan reactions); • Critical classification of statements from people, media, associations, studies, and so forth (e.g., praise from FIFA boss Gianni Infantino); • The media's own research that uncovers/addresses grievances; • Reporting on protests; • Critical reporting on audience interest/tournament organization; and • "Criticism of the criticism" (e.g., lack of understanding and accusation of a smear campaign against FIFA).	Yes No
V6 Keywords_critical	If V4 was coded with "Yes," the topics are recorded here with keywords. This can be, among other things, a critical view of . . .: • the awarding of Qatar as host • the working conditions • the human rights situation • the national laws • the regulations in Qatar • the atmosphere and the fans • the host country Qatar in general • the organization/infrastructure	0 does not apply keywords
V7 Noncritical topic surrounding Qatar as a host	V7 is coded as "yes" if the post does not convey any criticism apart from the game performance but addresses topics surrounding the host country Qatar that are beyond the direct game action.	Yes No 97 not assignable

(continued)

(continued)

Variable	Description (+ examples)	Range of values
V8 Keywords_Qatar Noncritical topics surrounding Qatar as a host	If V5 is “Yes”, the topics are assigned with keywords; this could be topics that have to do with Qatar as the host country, but are beyond from the game (result reporting): Keywords can include: • Stadiums • Infrastructure • Geography • Atmosphere • Fans • Organization of the tournament	0 does not apply keywords

Note. This is a version of the coding instructions translated to English for documentation purposes. The coding instructions used in the study were in German. FIFA = Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

Appendix B: Overview of the Posts Mentioned in the Qualitative Assessment P1–P29

Position in article	Long identifier including sports outlet, date, and time of the post	Instagram URL
P1	ESPNFC_2022-11-21_14_27_58_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIOfEXZMp3J
P2	TNTSportsBR_2022-11-21_10_39_37_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIOE8WMszm8
P3	KICKER_2022-11-21_12_50_09_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIOt4a2N8YX
P4	SKYSPORTS_2022-11-21_09_34_16_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIN9MAAgTcc
P5	MARCA_2022-11-28_22_02_15_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClhUoTGsEOF
P6	MARCA_2022-11-29_19_50_20_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CljqU7TLEBd
P7	DIARIO_OLE_2022-11-29_22_00_31_Pos01-03	https://www.instagram.com/p/Clj5OaXPLtZ
P8	DIARIO_OLE_2022-11-22_00_28_25_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClPjyqmNVcx
P9	MARCA_2022-11-21_17_22_42_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClOy0neNext
P10	MARCA_2022-11-22_10_06_49_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClQI--qLHCg
P11	DIARIO_OLE_2022-12-15_21_29_55_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmNCcM-t6E_
P12	DIARIO_OLE_2022-12-16_22_00_56_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmPqyV-MHur
P13	TNTSportsBR_2022-12-18_14_56_39_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmUD0i7NTOS
P14	TNTSportsBR_2022-11-20_18_07_26_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMTZAqoWSz
P15	KICKER_2022-11-20_18_22_13_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMVFpCNBsL
P16	MARCA_2022-11-19_17_44_13_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIJr1AgD4h9
P17	DIARIO_OLE_2022-11-24_17_09_08_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIWfi5CAuXq
P18	KICKER_2022-12-08_10_07_50_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CI5y0b2N0B2
P19	KICKER_2022-11-20_15_49_29_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMDjupgSs6
P20	DIARIO_OLE_2022-11-20_15_21_27_Pos01-04	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMAZs-OoKD
P21	MARCA_2022-11-20_15_57_42_Pos01-04	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMEjPYroER
P22	TNTSportsBR_2022-11-20_14_21_54_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIL5liVs90U
P23	TNTSportsBR_2022-11-26_11_47_35_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClbEoouuNKi/
P24	SKYSPORTS_2022-11-20_15_30_03_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIMBYwDoqV7/
P25	SPOTV_2022-11-21_02_08_11_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CINKahPSvzE
P26	ARRYADIATV_2022-12-15_16_31_19_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmMgRQJtPFK
P27	ARRYADIATV_2022-12-04_18_09_01_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClwWMI5rK0T
P28	ARRYADIATV_2022-12-12_23_42_19_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CmFi3Ysl6Ei
P29	ARRYADIATV_2022-11-21_21_59_28_Pos01	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIPSTyhoPy5

Note. Posts mentioned in the qualitative analysis are in the order of appearance in the text, given with their long identifiers (outlet_year-month-day_hour_minutes_seconds_slide) and direct URLs to the posts on Instagram.