

Protests and Calls for Boycotting the Qatar World Cup 2022 Spark Online Discussion and Action Away from the Soccer Pitch

Introduction

Global sporting events regularly spark conversations on issues beyond the playing field, including those at the nexus of sport and geopolitics. This year's World Cup is no exception, a conversation that began soon after the event was awarded by FIFA to Qatar, a Middle Eastern nation with a population of just over 3 million residents – exponentially smaller than typical hosts of such events – and with a record of exploitative labor systems and a highly questionable human rights record. While this conversation has led to protests and investigative reports on a range of news networks, it has also become a touchpoint of conversation on social media, a place where sports fans and critics often convene and to rally behind athletes, teams, and movements. This study will examine recent conversation about the upcoming World Cup and human rights issues. More specifically, it will measure social media conversation and sentiment around the rising question of boycotting the event. In other words, this study will examine what people are saying on social media about boycotting the World Cup and what impact that might have on the protest movement and the event itself.

To host the 2022 World Cup, Qatar would be required to build and refurbish significant infrastructure, such as stadiums, hotels, ports, roads, and a metro system, far more than other recent host nations that had far greater infrastructure and labor. Completing these large-scale infrastructure projects proved a daunting task for a tiny nation such as Qatar. To accommodate these needs, Qatar has resorted to migrant laborers who have been lured by the promise of economic opportunities unavailable in their home countries. Workers have largely hailed from South and South-East Asia, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines,

and Sri Lanka (Posner, 2022). According to the Human Rights Watch report in 2021, Qatar's migrant and foreign labor comprised nearly 95% of its total labor force. This has taken a significant medical toll. A recent medical study (Pradhan et al., 2019) discovered that a startling increase of cardiovascular-related deaths from 2009 to 2017 among Nepalese migrant workers occurred "most likely due to severe heat stress" (p. 47) that these construction laborers experienced while working outdoors in summer. *Sportswashing*, a term to describe nations and state actors' use of the spectacles of sports to paper over human rights violations and other abuses, is especially relevant in Qatar. Human rights organizations and international governments reported that 6,500 migrant laborers have died in the decade-long process of building the stadiums and infrastructure needed to host the tournament (Patisson & McIntyre, 2021).

Beyond the inhumane labor practices to prepare for the Cup, Qatar maintains long standing policies that violate basic human rights for much of its citizenry, particularly women. Qatar's discriminatory male guardianship system gravely undermines women's right to make independent decisions to study, work, travel, and marry (Debre, 2022; Grant, 2021). According to a 2021 Human Rights Watch [report](#), without a male guardian's permission, unmarried women under 25 years old are not allowed to travel abroad. Qatari women face the punishment of losing their husband's financial support if they travel or work without their permission. Unmarried women under 30 years old are prohibited from checking into a hotel. Women attending Qatar University have restrictions placed on their movements. Furthermore, Qatar has not stipulated any law to prevent domestic abuse and protect survivors of domestic violence. Women cannot make choices about their children's lives (e.g., schooling, medical treatment, etc.) as primary guardians even though they have legal custody after divorce or their children's father has

deceased. This laundry list of restrictions has contributed to external angst towards the host nation.

The Qatari government has also failed to protect the basic human rights of its LGBTQ+ population. Homosexuality is not legal in Qatar (MacInnes, 2022). Based on the 2021 U.S. State Department human rights report, LGBTQ+ people suffer from discriminatory practices in this country. Qatari law forbids same-sex sexual acts between men and, according to the Human Rights Watch's 2021 report, Qatari men engaged in same-sex relationships could face imprisonment between one to three years. Residents in Qatar risk persecution if they support gay rights. Even relatively innocuous activity such as liking pro-LGBTQ+ content on social media or raising the rainbow flag could subject one to persecution after the World Cup concludes (Younes, 2022). In September 2022, Human Rights Watch reported recurrent violence and sexual harassment against LGBTQ+ people in an underground prison in Doha, Capital city of Qatar. In October 2022, Human Rights Watch condemned the latest abuse where LGBTQ+ people were arbitrarily arrested and mistreated in detention. A 2022 survey conducted by a Scandinavian media group revealed that some hotels in Qatar even refuse to accommodate same-sex couples despite FIFA's assurances. These glaring repressions against LGBTQ+ people have raised serious concerns and fears among human rights groups, activists, and soccer players about the safety of LGBTQ+ residents and visitors during the World Cup (Jeong, 2022). A recent poll in Britain found that six out of 10 people in UK agree to boycott Qatar due its anti-gay laws (Addley, 2022).

Given these and other violations of human rights in and by the host nation of Qatar and with the World Cup soon to begin, human rights groups have advocated boycotting the tournament, particularly given the lack of substantial policy changes by the Qatari government

despite several meetings with advocacy groups and broad media coverage of these practices. This advocacy, coupled with on-going reporting that has highlighted such practices, has recently built momentum through in-person protests and calls to boycott the Cup by fans and athletes across the globe. This study will examine the potential rise of and sentiment around a World Cup boycott on social media, which has explosive potential in driving global attitudes towards this event through the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there an increase in conversation on Twitter about boycotting the World Cup

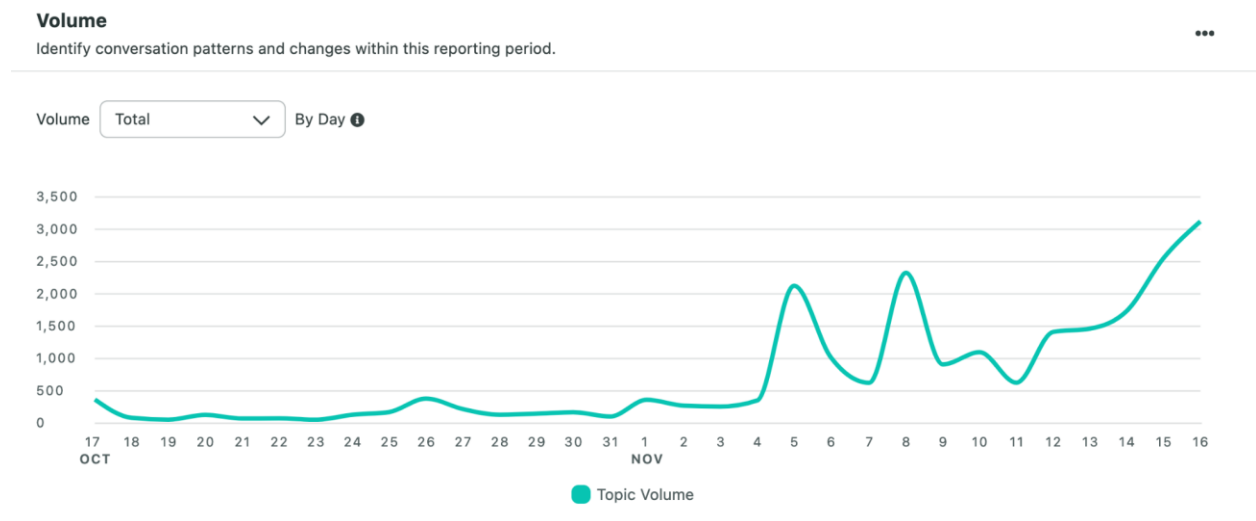
RQ2: For those discussing a boycott, what is the overall sentiment (positive or negative) on Twitter about the World Cup.

Method

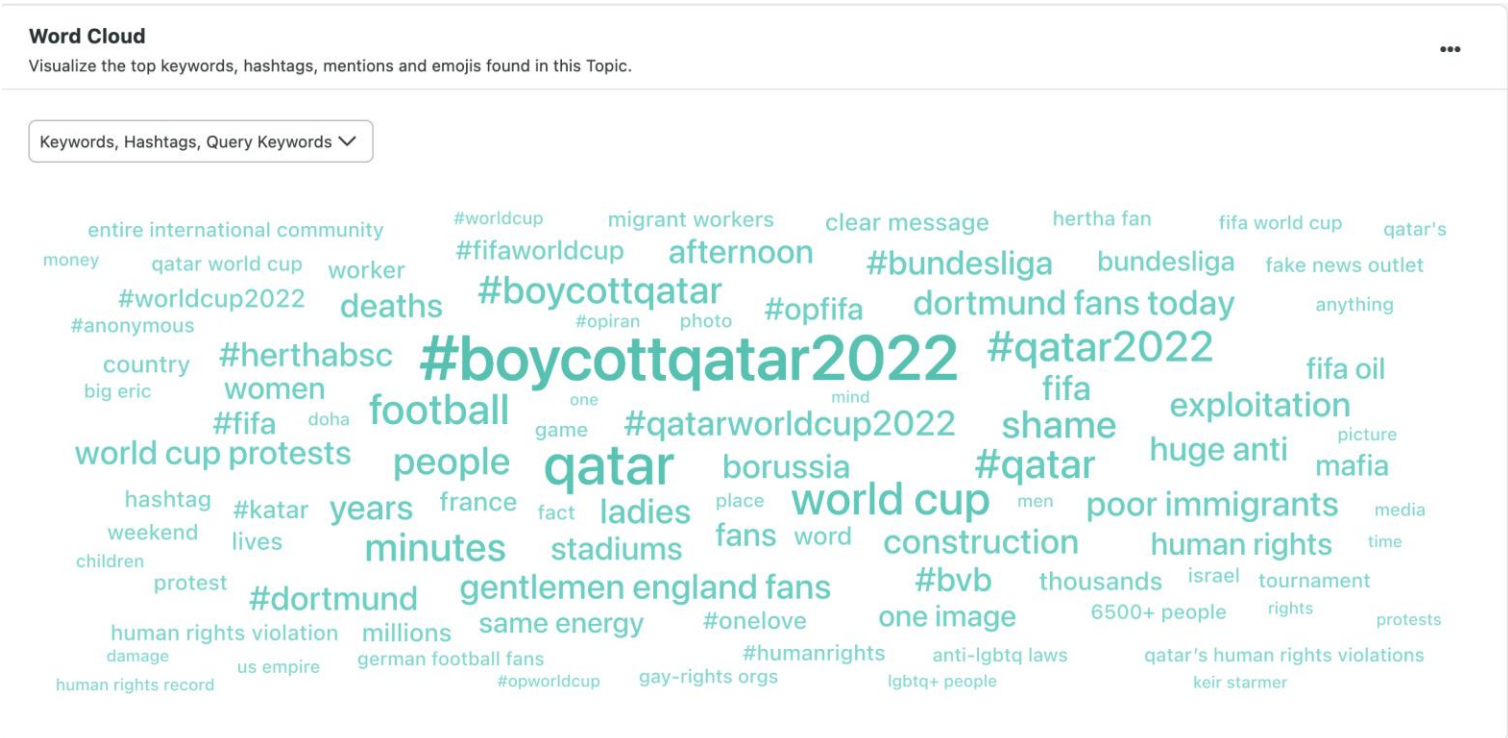
To address the above questions, researchers examined social media data collected from Sprout Social, a premium social media analytics platform that discovers trends and business insights through monitoring social conversations on various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, LinkedIn, etc.). This study evaluated social media posts between October 15 and November 14, 2022. The researchers first conducted a general search of social media platforms to evaluate which phrases and hashtags related to a World Cup boycott were more present on social media. This general search revealed the most popular hashtags, key words, and mentions surrounding this topic (e.g., #Opfifa, #BoycottQatarWC, #BoycottQatar2022, etc.) and the most fruitful social media platform for this conversation occurred on Twitter. Using these designated hashtags and keywords, a more broad search and analysis was conducted on Twitter to measure both the overall volume of tweets related to boycotting the World Cup and the overall sentiment towards the World Cup (and host nation Qatar) from those discussing the potential boycott.

Results

Overview of Results



There was a clear and demonstrated rise in the conversation on Twitter about the boycott of the World Cup in recent days as the first games approach. This conversation is parallel to the rise in protest movements across the globe and key statements by opinion leaders. Keywords and




hashtags such as “#boycottqatar2022,” “#opfifa,” “protests,” “world cup protests,” “huge anti,” “women,” “shame,” “exploitation,” “stadiums,” “mafia,” “human rights,” “construction,” “#onelove,” “migrant workers” were most prominently found on Twitter as illustrated in the above word cloud. These boycotting messages had a total impression of over 43 millions from mid-October to mid-November. Examining the clear spikes in the conversation, the number of associated posts quadrupled both on November 5 (coinciding with large protests in Europe) and November 8 (following homophobic comment by Khalid Salman, an ambassador for the World Cup Qatar 2022 and a former Qatari national team player). Given this ongoing upward trend, it is reasonable to assume that this resentment against Qatar’s hosting of this World Cup may intensify as the tournament begins this weekend and impact viewership, sponsor reactions, and fan and player engagement. The following sections highlight particular themes found in social media content on Twitter through this study.

Denouncing Inhuman Treatment of Migrant Workers

Several posts on Twitter vehemently decried Qatar’s mistreatment of migrant workers. Nearly 60% of the collected tweets denounced the number of foreign workers who have died in preparing for the Cup. Fans equated attending Qatar games as supporting a “criminal World Cup.” A large number of Twitter users tweeted “15,000 deaths¹ for 5,760 minutes of football – shame on you.” Some heavily circulated posts included expressions of sympathy and the perception of injustice, including the following: “How can Welsh Labour consider itself to be the ‘party of workers’ when it is plowing ahead with an unnecessary and immoral trip to Qatar where 1000s of migrant workers have died? #BoycottQatar;” “Qatar 2022 World Cup in one image, 6,500 people ha[ve] died in 10 years of exploitation and overwork, most of them poor

¹ A disputable number. [The Guardian](#) reported that 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar from 2011 to 2021.

immigrants, at the construction of the stadiums in Qatar. For FIFA oil  were more important than people life's. FIFA=MAFIA #Qatar2022 #BoycottQatar2022 #OpFifa.” Tweets from boycott activists often held FIFA accountable for Qatar’s human rights abuse, as exemplified by the following tweet: “I feel this World Cup is tainted. FIFA follows the profits and chooses to stick with a regime with a dire human rights record and appalling treatment of migrant workers. For me, with or without Bafana, I #BoycottQatar2022.”

Condemning Suppression on LGBTQ+ People

Discussions of Qatar’s suppression on LGBTQ+ people and the World Cup on Twitter tended to be associated with topics related to Qatar’s anti-LGBTQ law, abuse against LGBTQ+ people, safety of LGBTQ fans and residents in Qatar, as well as general support for diversity and inclusion, such as the OneLove campaign (a diversity campaign advocating for inclusion and opposing discrimination). A series of trending keywords reflected the above themes, such as “fears,” “anti-LGBTQ laws,” “LGBTQ+ people,” “ruthless approach,” “shame,” “solidarity,” and “damage.” Some most frequently tweeted posts included the following: “The latest revelation from the Qatari ambassador to @FIFACOM that, in the Qatari opinion, LGBTQ+ people are sick in the mind is disgusting! It shows Qatar is a backward, ignorant society not worthy of being on the global stage #BoycottQatar2022;” “Qatar World Cup ambassador Khalid Salman has said that homosexuality is "damage in the mind"”.

Decrying Violation of Women’s Rights

Much of the conversation about the boycott of the World Cup focused on Qatar’s policies around women’s rights. Highly circulated tweets included the following: “Qatar. where women get lashes and jail for being raped, should NEVER have been on the long list If you give a damn about women's rights, boycott FiFas world cup #BoycottQatar2022;” “Women in #Qatar who

report rape are sent to jail #BoycottQatar2022 #Qatar2022;” “All Arab leaders are the epitome of hypocrisy; here we see the ruling Saudi family living it up with none of their ladies in hijab/burka when they insist everyone else must. Like the Qataris telling you homosexuality is illegal. #QatarWorldCup2022 #BoycottQatar2022 | QT: Saudi Prince Nawaf al-Saud in #Turkey with his family & friends, while women aren't allowed 2 drive in his country;” and “This incident involved women on 10 flights being taken off planes at gunpoint by Qatari authorities and sexually assaulted, 5 of them are taking legal action. No one should fly with @qatarairways or to/via Qatar @DohaAirport. It isn't safe. #BoycottQatar.”

Often, advocates of boycott condemned the violation of women’s rights along with other transgressions (e.g., abuse against LGBTQ+ people, mistreatment of poor immigrants, etc.). The following frequently retweeted post demonstrated such theme: “Going to Qatar means supporting a radical Islamist regime which has caused THOUSANDS of people to lose their lives and enables suppression of non-muslims, women and LGBT-people. This is a criminal World Cup. #BoycottQatar2022 #Qatar2022 #QatarWorldCup2022.” As such, the boycott movement on social media often leveraged multiple human rights issues to create a stronger narrative.

Urging for Protests

In the weeks leading to the start of the World Cup, fans, human rights activists, and soccer teams have been advocating for various protests against the alleged human rights and environmental violations in Qatar (Fahey, 2022). This call for protests has mostly happened among soccer fans in Europe, leading to massive protests among fans in Germany, Spain, France, and the Netherlands. There was a clear connection between in-person protests and conversations on social media, as fans used soccer teams’ hashtags and inclusive language (e.g.,

#bundesliga, #bvb, #HerthaFan, German football fans, Dortmund fans, etc.) to rally like-minded protestors to join the protest at the games. This demonstrates the power of social media platforms like Twitter to both echo and likely amplify in-person engagement, something that could clearly lead to a much more pronounced boycott movement in coordination.

It is also clear that professional soccer teams have tried to separate participation of their athletes in the World Cup from condoning Qatar's violations (Robinson, 2022). As a result, a few major cities in France (e.g. Strasbourg, Paris, Lille, Marseille, etc.) have decided not to publicly broadcast the World Cup matches on giant screens in fan zones (Beardsley, 2022). Several European soccer federations (e.g., England, Germany, France, Dutch) decided to have their captains wear armbands with a rainbow heart design as part of an anti-discrimination campaign at the World Cup in Qatar (Panja, 2022). Denmark joined the protest by providing a black option for its team jerseys at the World Cup to honor the death of migrant workers (Whitehead, 2022). The U.S. soccer squad will have the rainbow-themed team logo inside their training facility and media workroom during the World Cup to support the LGBTQ+ community (Reuters, 2022). We believe that such directives have been moved forward due to the growth in conversation on social media, a space that demonstrates and cultivates fan sentiment towards this upcoming event.

Conclusion

Results from our study suggest that Qatar's infringements on human rights has created significant conversation about their hosting of the World Cup on social media, and most of this conversation supports a growing boycott movement. It is also clear that content on Twitter both coincides with and likely amplifies actual in-person protest movements, and it likely influences fans, teams, and countries to actively address human rights issues in Qatar. Finally, a deeper look

at tweets that have been amplified suggest they are keely tied to specific violations and accusations, more drastically linking this World Cup to the most egregious violations. There is a growing sense that holding World Cup in Qatar is a step too far, that even the tremendous spectacle of soccer cannot overcome the overwhelming concerns in the host nation (Smith, 2022). This hypothesis will play out in the upcoming weeks as games are played. Regardless, it is clear that social media will be an integral part of that trajectory.

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