

The role of sport in promoting nation branding and public diplomacy: A sentiment and media framing analysis of Morocco at the 2022 Fifa world cup

Abstract. This paper examines the role of sporting mega-events as instruments of soft power and nation branding, using Morocco's historic semi-final run at the 2022 FIFA World Cup as an empirical case study. While existing scholarship has focused predominantly on the reputational effects of hosting mega-events, the mechanisms through which exceptional athletic performance generates soft power for non-hosting nations, particularly from Africa and the Arab world, remain undertheorised. To address this gap, the study adopts a parallel convergent mixed-methods design integrating transformer-based emotion detection on a Twitter/X corpus of 50,000–200,000 posts with a media framing analysis of 4,386 articles across 97 outlets retrieved from the Media Cloud platform. Applying DistilRoBERTa-base for multi-class emotion classification and Entman's framing theory for lexical frame identification, the findings reveal that Morocco's campaign generated a 14-fold surge in global media attention, a dominant joy intensity of 0.46 in public discourse, and five distinct media frames, of which the cultural pride and nation-brand frames carry the greatest soft power significance. The convergence of emotion peaks and framing shifts at the December 10 quarter-final provides robust corroborative evidence of soft power construction. The study contributes a performance-based soft power model applicable to middle-income African and Arab nations and a replicable mixed-methods analytical framework for future research.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Soft Power, X Sentiment Analysis, Sports Diplomacy, Morocco, Qatar 2022.

1 Introduction

Morocco's unprecedented performance in the 2022 FIFA World Cup constitutes a salient case for examining the intersection of sport, geopolitics, and nation branding. Situated at the crossroads of Africa, the Arab world, and the Mediterranean, Morocco has increasingly leveraged its geopolitical positioning through strategic international engagement. Its joint bid with Spain and Portugal to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup reflects a broader ambition to institutionalize the soft power gains derived from sporting success into sustained global visibility and diplomatic capital (El-Dabt et al., 2025; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Beyond athletic achievement, Morocco's tournament trajectory generated widespread international attention while simultaneously activating complex historical and political narratives, illustrating the dynamics of the "soft power–soft disempowerment nexus" (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Despite the analytical relevance of such performances, existing scholarship remains predominantly focused on mega-event hosting rather than the reputational effects of exceptional performance by non-host nations (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Roche, 2003; Ishac et al., 2024). This gap is particularly pronounced for countries from Africa and the Arab world, whose representation in global sports discourse has been comparatively limited (Al Mohannadi et al., 2025). Furthermore, methodological limitations persist, as studies tend to rely either on qualitative media analyses or large-scale social media metrics, rarely integrating both within a unified analytical framework capable of capturing framing processes alongside public emotional reception (Cull, 2008; 2013; Manor, 2019; Ingenhoff & Chariatte, 2025). Advances in natural language processing, particularly transformer-based models, offer new opportunities to address this limitation by enabling fine-grained, multi-class emotion analysis beyond binary sentiment classifications (Nagao et al., 2024).

Against this background, the present study is guided by the following overarching research question: To what extent did Morocco's participation in the 2022 FIFA World Cup generate measurable soft power and nation branding effects, as evidenced by media framing patterns in global news coverage and emotional responses in Twitter/X discourse?

This overarching question is operationalized through three specific research questions:

RQ1: How did global English-language news media frame Morocco's 2022 FIFA World Cup campaign across the tournament period, and which frames carry the greatest significance for soft power and nation branding?

RQ2: What emotional responses did Morocco's World Cup campaign generate in global Twitter/X discourse, and how did these emotional patterns evolve across the tournament's key match events?

RQ3: To what extent do the media framing patterns and public emotional responses identified in RQ1 and RQ2 converge in constituting soft power and place branding effects for Morocco, and what do points of convergence or divergence reveal about the mechanisms through which mega-event performance generates national reputational capital?

In pursuing these questions, the study has four specific analytical objectives: (1) to map the temporal evolution of Morocco's media attention across the tournament period and identify the critical junctures at which framing shifts occurred; (2) to construct an empirically grounded typology of media frames through lexical analysis of the news corpus; (3) to track the distribution and temporal dynamics of emotional categories in Morocco-related Twitter discourse using transformer-based emotion detection; and (4) to integrate both analytical streams within a unified theoretical framework of soft power and place branding, drawing on Entman's (1993) framing theory and Anholt's (2007) competitive identity model.

2 Literature Review

This literature review maps the theoretical and empirical terrain within which the present study is situated. It is organized around five interconnected bodies of scholarship that collectively provide the conceptual architecture for analyzing Morocco's 2022 FIFA World Cup campaign as a soft power and nation branding event. The review begins by establishing the foundational concept of soft power and its application to sport, before examining nation branding and place branding theory, media framing and agenda-setting, the role of social media and public diplomacy in the digital era, and the emerging field of computational sentiment and emotion analysis in sporting and diplomatic contexts.

4.1 Definition of the Concept of Public Diplomacy

The concept of public diplomacy was first introduced in 1965 by Edmund A. Gullion. It refers to the set of communication actions carried out by a state at the international level with the aim of influencing the perceptions and attitudes of foreign publics.

Since 2001, the importance of public diplomacy has significantly increased: governments use it as a strategic communication tool to attract the attention of populations in other countries and to shape their attitudes and behaviors (Nye, 2008; Snitzer, 2008), while transmitting “its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies” (Tuch, 1990, p.3).

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which primarily targets foreign governments, public diplomacy adopts a broader approach by also engaging citizens, NGOs, and various foreign organizations (Manor, 2019). Its objective is not limited to managing official relations or diplomatic decision-making. Rather, it seeks to influence international public opinion in order to support and strengthen a country’s policy directions (Rasmussen & Merkelsen, 2012).

From this perspective, public diplomacy relies on two-way, intercultural communication between private individuals or groups. These actors may operate outside the direct influence of the government, as their interests do not necessarily coincide with those of the state (Nye, 2008; Szondi, 2008; Cull, 2009).

4.2 Sport as a Vehicle of Soft Power

Soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph S. Nye (1990), refers to a country’s ability to influence other nations not through coercion but through attraction. This influence primarily relies on culture, political values, and foreign policy, which help shape the preferences and behaviors of international actors (Nye, 2004).

Sport constitutes one of the key sources of soft power. Its use in the context of sports diplomacy has particularly developed since 2012 (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). Within this framework, sport aims to transmit and promote a country’s values while enhancing its international visibility (Nye, 2004).

Mega-sporting events can serve as levers of soft power, though states do not always pursue the same objectives. Germany, for instance, leveraged the 2006 FIFA World Cup to improve its international image and strengthen diplomatic relations through a structured public diplomacy strategy. Conversely, Russia used the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup primarily to assert national prestige and promote the idea of a return to the global stage as a major power.

Thus, soft power becomes a key element of public diplomacy. This is exemplified by sports diplomacy between China and the United States, notably through the deployment of the U.S. national table tennis team to China, an event that fostered closer bilateral relations and strengthened China's international image (Özsarı et al, 2018).

Moreover, these sporting events can act as an indirect driver of tourism, providing an opportunity to present the host country favorably and reinforce the image of its destinations (Jeong et al., 2019), thereby serving as a powerful tool for tourism promotion.

The hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa is a prime example of the interaction between soft power and public diplomacy. Indeed, soft power defined as a state's ability to influence the perceptions and behaviors of foreign actors through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990) is concretely manifested here. Hosting this international sporting event enabled South Africa to project a positive image to foreign audiences, particularly American sports fans, thereby improving their perception of the nation (Fullerton & Holtzhausen, 2012).

4.3 Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Perspectives

According to György Szondi (2008), public diplomacy aims to build a positive reputation and promote an attractive image of a country, relying in particular on nation branding. This approach is based on the belief that a state's image constitutes a major strategic asset in international relations (Ham, 2001; Gök, 2020).

The concept of nation branding was first studied in the field of marketing (Anholt, 1998), providing a theoretical foundation for international relations scholars (Dinnie, 2008). Globalization and the rise of new technologies have led states to recognize the importance of their image and positioning on the international stage (Ham, 2001).

These developments have also intensified competition between countries, making differentiation essential. In this context, nation branding represents a means to develop a distinct brand identity and acquire a strategic competitive advantage (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011).

Nation branding consists of creating "shorthands", i.e., easily identifiable elements representing a nation. These may include logos, slogans, designs, or any other symbols contributing to the construction of the country's brand image (Anholt, 2007). These elements are communicated to foreign publics through media, including satellite news channels and the Internet, thus aligning with the contemporary perspective of public diplomacy (Cornelissen & Thorpe, 2002).

According to Szondi (2008), the relationship between nation branding and public diplomacy can be understood through five distinct perspectives. The first perspective views nation branding and public diplomacy as two separate spheres. Nation branding relies primarily on one-way communication, while public diplomacy emphasizes two-way communication, demonstrating that they are based on fundamentally different strategies. The second perspective emphasizes that nation branding draws on public diplomacy as a communication tool to enhance the country's brand image. The third approach reverses this logic, arguing that public diplomacy uses branding as a strategic instrument to construct a positive national image, highlighting the central role of the government in this process. The fourth perspective maintains that nation branding and public diplomacy remain distinct but operate through similar activities, centered on culture, image, and values, and pursue the same objective: strengthening the ties between governments and publics. Finally, the fifth perspective argues that the two concepts are essentially identical, sharing the same purpose and pursuing convergent objectives.

More recent scholarship has examined the relationship between nation branding and digital communication, highlighting the growing importance of social media as an arena in which nation brands are co-constructed by publics rather than solely projected by governments. Ingenhoff and Chariatte (2025) and Boatwright and Pyle (2023) both emphasize that in the contemporary digital media environment, the nation brand is as much a product of organic public discourse (on platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok) as of official communication. This insight grounds the present study's methodological decision to analyze Twitter discourse as a primary indicator of Morocco's nation brand equity: in a digital media environment, public emotional responses to a sporting event constitute a measurable dimension of the nation brand itself, not merely a reaction to it.

4.4 Media Framing, Agenda-Setting, and the Construction of National Image

Media framing theory, most influentially developed by Entman (1993), offers a key framework for understanding how news media construct national image through the selective emphasis of attributes, narratives, and interpretations. As Entman defines it, frames “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text... to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”. This perspective has been widely applied to how nations are represented in international news. In the context of sporting mega-events, media framing operates as the central mechanism through which athletic performance is translated into national image: global media frames transform a football victory into a symbol of historic African pride, or a semi-final defeat into a narrative of post-colonial resilience.

McCombs and Shaw's (1993) agenda-setting theory provides an essential complement to framing analysis by demonstrating that the amount of media coverage devoted to an issue shapes its salience for public audiences, determining not what to think, but what to think about. When integrated with framing theory, this perspective highlights how media not only elevate certain topics onto the public agenda but also shape how those topics are interpreted through selective narratives and meanings.

Within this theoretical lens, the study of Morocco's World Cup media coverage can be situated as an instance where agenda-setting and framing processes jointly inform international perception formation. In the broader literature, this interaction is particularly relevant for understanding how media attention and interpretive narratives work together to construct national images, especially in the context of globally visible events.

Scholarly work has also emphasized that the framing of non-Western nations in Western media is neither neutral nor uniform. Hong et Hu (2025), for instance, show in their analysis of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics that Western Anglophone outlets often privilege geopolitical and governance-oriented interpretations over cultural or athletic dimensions. Similarly, Van Gorp (2007) argues that framing is shaped by media-specific "framing packages," with different genres, such as quality press, cable news, and sports media, producing distinct interpretive patterns based on their institutional logics and audiences.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the interplay between agenda-setting (salience) and framing (interpretation) provides a useful analytical framework for examining how media coverage can construct layered representations of nations in international contexts, particularly through the differentiated roles of media types and the narratives they prioritize.

4.5 Public diplomacy, social media, and the digital turn

The digitalization of public communication has fundamentally transformed the landscape of public diplomacy and nation branding. Cull (2008) identified social media as a transformative force in public diplomacy, enabling states to communicate directly with foreign publics without media intermediation and allowing publics to participate actively in the construction of national narratives. Manor (2019) extended this argument in "The digitalization of public diplomacy", demonstrating that social media platforms have not merely supplemented traditional public diplomacy instruments but have created new arenas of geopolitical competition in which narratives about nations are contested, amplified, and viralized at unprecedented speed and scale (Manor et Huang, 2022). In this context, Twitter/X occupies a particularly significant position: its real-time, public, and globally accessible architecture makes it simultaneously a barometer of public opinion and a medium through which national narratives circulate and accumulate reputational weight.

The intersection of public diplomacy and social media sentiment has been examined empirically in several recent studies that provide important comparative benchmarks for the present research. In a paradigmatic study of pandemic public diplomacy, You (2020) analyzed social media and international news coverage of South Korea's COVID-19 response and found that sentiment analyses of Twitter and news media converged in positioning South Korea as a model of effective governance, demonstrating that Twitter sentiment can serve as a valid and sensitive indicator of nation brand perceptions among internationally engaged digital publics. This methodological precedent directly legitimizes the present study's use of Twitter emotion detection as a proxy for Morocco's nation brand equity in global public opinion. More recently, Cămpian and Cergă (2025) demonstrated in their semantic and

sentiment analysis of elite athletes' well-being narratives that transformer-based NLP models can reveal nuanced patterns in sport-related social media discourse that are invisible to traditional content analysis, underscoring the methodological value of the computational approach adopted in the present study.

3 Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating computational text analysis with interpretive media framing analysis to examine how Morocco's participation in the 2022 FIFA World Cup contributed to its nation branding and public diplomacy efforts. The choice of a mixed-methods approach is theoretically motivated: the research questions require both the breadth of large-scale quantitative measurement, to capture the scope and emotional tenor of public discourse across tens of thousands of X posts, and the depth of qualitative interpretive analysis, to identify the specific narrative frames through which global news media constructed Morocco's international image. The phenomenon under investigation is inherently multi-dimensional: it manifests simultaneously in the emotional responses of mass publics (captured through social media data) and in the representational practices of professional media institutions (captured through news media analysis). A single-method approach would capture only one facet of this complex phenomenon; the integration of both streams allows for methodological triangulation and a richer, more defensible set of findings.

Table 1. Research Design Overview.

Dimension	Stream 1: social media	Stream 2: News media
Data source	Twitter/X (Kaggle + API)	Media Cloud (Online News)
Unit of analysis	Individual tweet	News article / term frequency
Search query	Morocco / Maroc + WC 2022	Morocco / Maroc
Time window	Nov 20 – Dec 18, 2022	Nov 1, 2022 – Jan 1, 2023
Corpus size	50,000–200,000 tweets	4,386 sampled articles
Analytical tool	DistilRoBERTa-base (Python)	Media Cloud + lexical framing
Output	Emotion distribution over time	Frame clusters + attention peaks

The empirical analysis is built on two distinct but complementary data streams, each capturing a different register of Morocco's global media presence during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The first stream consists of Twitter/X social media data, representing the spontaneous, user-generated dimension of public discourse. The second stream consists of online news media data retrieved via the Media Cloud platform, representing the institutional, professionally mediated dimension of Morocco's international coverage. Table II provides a summary of all datasets used in the study.

Table 2. Dataset Summary

Dataset	Type	Period	Access Method
Kaggle WC 2022 tweets	Pre-existing dataset	Nov–Dec 2022	Public repository
Twitter/X API scrape	Primary collection	Nov–Dec 2022	Academic API
Media Cloud (counts)	Aggregate time series	Nov 1 – Jan 1	Media Cloud platform
Media Cloud (top words)	Lexical frequency	Full period	Media Cloud platform
Media Cloud (top sources)	Source typology	Full period	Media Cloud platform

The study combined social media and news media datasets to capture discourse around Morocco during the 2022 World Cup. Tweets were sourced from a Kaggle dataset and supplemented via the Twitter Academic API for the period November 20–December 18, 2022, then cleaned through a Python preprocessing pipeline (deduplication, language filtering to English/French/Arabic, removal of non-linguistic elements, and hashtag normalization), yielding a corpus of roughly 50,000–200,000 posts. News coverage was collected from Media Cloud (developed by Berkman Klein Center and MIT Media Lab) using the keywords “Morocco/Maroc” between November 1, 2022 and January 1, 2023, producing three analytical datasets: a daily coverage time series (62 observations), top-term frequencies from 4,386 articles, and a source distribution across 97 outlets, enabling agenda-setting, framing, and source analyses.

Emotion detection was performed using the DistilRoBERTa-base transformer model, implemented in Python through the Hugging Face Transformers library. The model was fine-tuned for multi-class classification aligned with Robert Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions, generating a probability distribution across core emotional categories for each tweet, from which the dominant label was extracted. Aggregated temporally, these outputs enabled the construction of an emotional trajectory tracking shifts in global affect toward Morocco across the tournament period.

The media framing analysis follows Robert Entman’s (1993) conception of framing as processes of selection and salience through which media emphasize particular interpretations of reality. Frames were operationalized via lexical analysis of the Media Cloud top-term dataset, enabling the inductive construction of five thematic clusters (sporting achievement, broadcast/consumer, geopolitical, cultural pride, and nation-brand) based on semantic grouping of co-occurring high-salience terms. To capture variation in interpretive logics across the media ecosystem, outlets were further classified into five typological categories, allowing cross-tabulation of frame prevalence by outlet type, consistent with evidence that framing patterns vary according to institutional and audience orientations (e.g., Koen van Gorp, 2007).

The study integrates emotion detection and media framing through a parallel convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), whereby both datasets

were analyzed independently and compared at the interpretation stage. Convergence between emotional peaks and shifts in media frames is treated as corroborative evidence of soft power effects across public and institutional communication arenas, while divergences are interpreted substantively as indicators of potential gaps between organic public sentiment and mediated narratives.

4 Results and Data

4.1 Sentiment and Emotion Analysis of Twitter/X Discourse Around Morocco at the 2022 FIFA World Cup

As a preliminary step, the overall emotional profile of the corpus was examined across the full monitoring period (November 20 – December 18, 2022) to establish the aggregate affective landscape within which Morocco's World Cup campaign was received on social media. Figure 1 presents the global emotional profile of Morocco-related tweets, displaying the mean intensity score for each of the seven emotional categories derived from the DistilRoBERTa-base classification model¹.

¹ Note. Scores represent mean emotion intensity across all sampled tweets (N = 50,000–200,000). Emotions classified according to Plutchik's (1980) eight-category model using DistilRoBERTa-base.

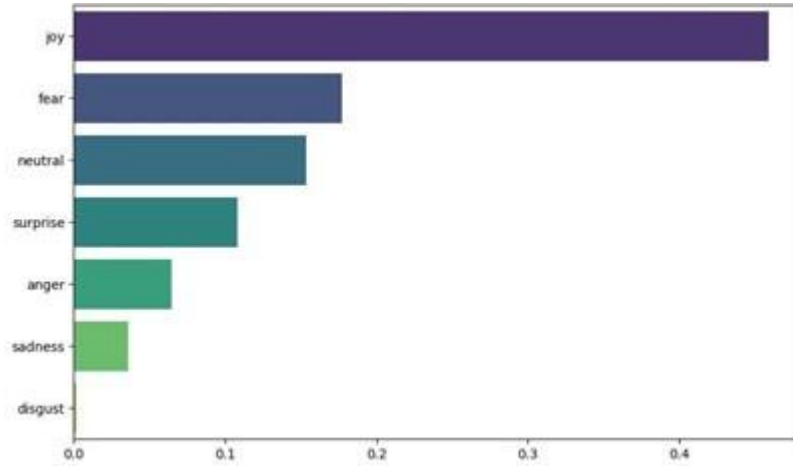


Fig. 1. Global Emotional Profile of Morocco-Related Twitter Discourse During the 2022 FIFA World Cup

The results reveal a strongly dominant role for joy, which achieved a mean intensity score of approximately 0.46, substantially higher than any other emotional category. This finding is consistent with the theoretical expectations of place branding research, which posits that successful sporting performance generates positive affect that accrues to the nation's image (Anholt, 2007). Fear emerged as the second most prevalent emotion (0.18), followed by neutral affect (0.15) and surprise (0.11). Anger (0.07) and sadness (0.04) were comparatively marginal, while disgust was virtually absent from the corpus (0.01).

The dominance of joy over all other emotional categories, constituting nearly half of the average emotional intensity in the corpus, represents a substantively significant finding for the study's central research question. It indicates that Morocco's World Cup campaign generated an overwhelmingly positive affective response in global X discourse, creating the emotional foundation for place brand equity accumulation that Anholt's competitive identity framework anticipates. The non-negligible presence of fear and surprise, however, introduces important nuance: these emotions likely index the anticipatory anxiety and disbelief that accompanied Morocco's successive upset victories, rather than negative sentiment toward Morocco, a distinction that the temporal analysis in the following paragraph helps to clarify.

Building on the aggregate profile, the temporal dimension of emotional expression was examined by mapping the evolution of joy and surprise intensities across the key match dates of Morocco's tournament campaign. This approach replicates the analytical logic employed by Nagao et al. (2024) in their longitudinal sentiment analysis of place branding discourse, in which emotional fluctuations were tracked in relation to identifiable real-world events to assess the responsiveness of public affect to specific stimuli. Figure 2 presents the temporal evolution of joy (Joie) and surprise across Morocco's match dates, from the group stage opening (November 21) through the third-place playoff and its aftermath (December 17–18).

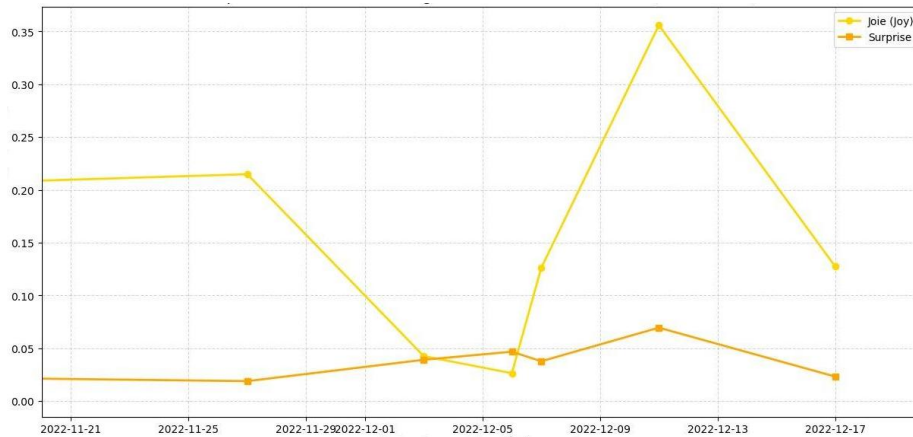


Fig. 2. Temporal Evolution of Emotional Intensity (Joy and Surprise) in Morocco-Related Twitter Discourse by Match Date, November–December 2022.²

Several analytically significant patterns are observable in Figure 2. During the group stage phase (November 21 – November 27), joy maintained a relatively stable and elevated level (0.21), suggesting a consistent baseline of positive affect throughout Morocco's early campaign. A notable decline in joy occurred between November 27 and December 1, coinciding with the period between Morocco's group-stage victory over Belgium and the final group-stage fixture, a pattern consistent with the post-victory emotional recalibration observed in comparable event-based sentiment studies, in which the immediacy of emotional peaks rapidly attenuates absent a new stimulus event.

The most striking feature of the temporal data is the sharp and sustained escalation of joy following Morocco's Round of 16 victory over Spain on December 6, culminating in a peak intensity of approximately 0.36 on December 11, the day following the quarter-final victory over Portugal on December 10. This represents a 70% increase over the group-stage joy baseline, and constitutes the emotional apex of Morocco's World Cup campaign as expressed on social media. The December 10 quarter-final is particularly significant: Morocco became the first African and Arab nation in history to reach the semi-finals of a FIFA World Cup, and the emotional intensity of X discourse reflects the magnitude of this achievement as perceived by global publics. The co-occurrence network analysis presented in Figure 3 further illuminates the semantic context of this peak.

Surprise exhibited a complementary temporal pattern to joy, peaking on December 3 (0.05) and December 11 (0.07), closely following unexpected knockout victories. This aligns with theory that surprise amplifies positive affect rather than signaling negative emotion independently. The December 10–11 cluster indicates the quarter-

² Note. Values represent mean emotion intensity per match date. Data points correspond to Morocco's competitive fixtures: Group stage (Nov 23, 27, Dec 1), Round of 16 (Dec 6), Quarter-final (Dec 10), Semi-final (Dec 14), and Third-place playoff (Dec 17)

final win over Portugal was the tournament's most emotionally potent event on X. Joy declined sharply after the semi-final loss to France on December 14 (0.13 on December 17) but remained above baseline, reflecting event-driven emotional responses and mirroring post-event decay in media attention (see section 1.6.2). Notably, sustained joy suggests a residual positive affect that may support enduring place brand equity beyond the tournament.

Co-occurrence Network: Morocco's Emotional Journey at World Cup 2022

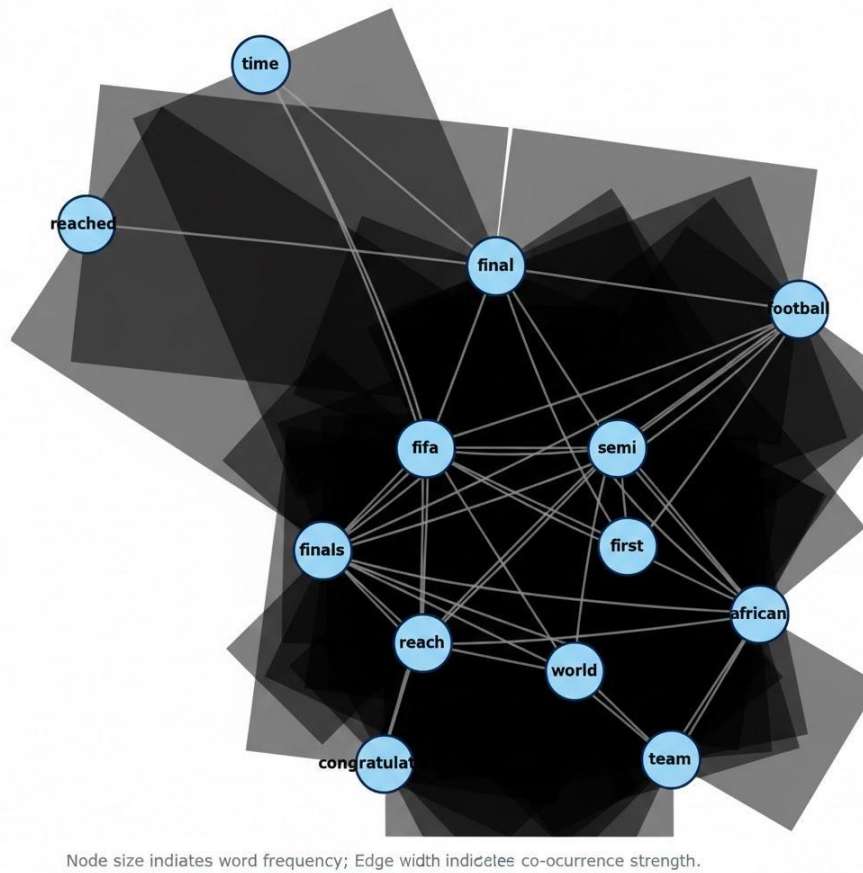


Fig. 3. Co-occurrence Network of High-Frequency Terms in Joy-Coded Morocco-Related Tweets, December 10–14, 2022.

To explore the thematic content underlying emotional peaks, a co-occurrence network was constructed for joy-coded tweets from December 10–14, 2022. The network highlights high-frequency terms (Figure 3) and their relational structure, revealing conceptual associations through which Morocco's historic World Cup achievement was processed. Central nodes, 'final,' 'semi,' 'fifa,' and 'african', reflect the African/Arab pride frame, while peripheral nodes such as 'congratulate' and 'reached' emphasize celebratory and temporal aspects. Taken together, the co-occurrence network

corroborates and deepens the temporal analysis: the joy peak of December 10–11 was not merely a reflexive emotional response to a match outcome but was semantically organized around the historically unprecedented nature of Morocco's achievement. X users did not simply express joy at a victory; they expressed joy at an event that was explicitly framed as historic, African, and world-defining, the precise semantic register that place branding and soft power theory identifies as generative of durable national image capital (Anholt, 2007; Nye, 2004).

4.2 Media attention dynamics: temporal evolution of coverage

The Media Cloud dataset encompasses 4,386 sampled articles published across 97 outlets over a 62-day monitoring window (November 1, 2022 – January 1, 2023), yielding a total daily article count that tracks the evolution of Morocco's global media presence with considerable granularity. Analysis of the temporal distribution reveals a non-linear, event-driven attention pattern consistent with the theoretical expectations of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and the episodic nature of mega-event media cycles (Roche, 2003; 2006).

Five distinct phases are identifiable within the data (see Table III). During the pre-tournament baseline phase (November 1–19), daily coverage averaged 24.2 articles, representing Morocco's ordinary media footprint, predominantly limited to pre-tournament previews, group-stage matchday scheduling, and betting-related content. This baseline is consistent with the country's marginal position in Anglophone and francophone sports media prior to the tournament.

Table 3. Phases of Media Attention Toward Morocco During the 2022 FIFA World Cup Period

Phase	Period	Date Range	Daily Avg. (articles)	Peak (articles)
Pre-tournament baseline	1	Nov 1–19, 2022	24.2	51 (Nov 16)
Group stage activation	2	Nov 20–30, 2022	61.1	132 (Nov 27)
Knockout escalation	3	Dec 1–9, 2022	113.0	195 (Dec 6)
Peak visibility window	4	Dec 10–17, 2022	212.5	340 (Dec 14)
Post-tournament decay	5	Dec 18 – Jan 1, 2023	22.6	39 (Dec 30)

Source: Author's analysis based on Media Cloud data (n = 4,386 articles; November 1, 2022 – January 1, 2023)

The group stage activation phase (November 20–30) marked the first significant escalation, with daily coverage rising to an average of 61.1 articles. The spike to 132

articles on November 27 corresponds to Morocco's 2–0 defeat of Belgium, a result widely characterized as an upset given Belgium's FIFA ranking at the time. This event triggered the initial emergence of the 'African/Arab pride' framing cluster that would intensify as the tournament progressed. The most pronounced transformation in media volume occurred during the knockout escalation (December 1–9) and peak visibility window (December 10–17) phases. Coverage peaked at 195 articles on December 6 following Morocco's penalty shootout victory over Spain, and reached its absolute maximum of 340 articles on December 14, the day following the semi-final against France.

This 14-fold increase over the pre-tournament baseline constitutes compelling evidence of an increase in global attention generated by high-performance in mega-sporting events. Expressed as a proportion of total daily output in the Media Cloud corpus, Morocco-related articles reached a ratio of 0.0280 on December 14, nearly ten times the baseline ratio of 0.0029. The post-tournament decay phase (December 18 – January 1, 2023) saw coverage return rapidly toward baseline levels, with a daily average of 22.6 articles. This pattern of rapid post-event attenuation is consistent with the literature on media salience and agenda cycling, where heightened issue attention dissipates absent new stimulus events (Downs, 1972).

The source typology reveals a pronounced concentration in Anglophone, predominantly US-based media outlets (see Table IV). The top three sources, Sporting News (11.47%), Fox Sports (6.95%), and The Guardian (6.92%), account collectively for approximately 25.3% of all sampled coverage, while the top ten outlets represent approximately 47.5% of the total sample. This level of concentration has important implications for the diversity of frames to which global audiences were exposed.

Table 4. Top Media Sources: Article Distribution and Dominant Frame by Outlet Type.

Outlet	Type	Articles	Share (%)	Dominant Frame
sportingnews.com	Sports media	497	11.47	Sporting achievement
foxsports.com	Sports media	301	6.95	Sporting achievement
theguardian.com	Quality press (UK)	300	6.92	Geopolitical / Cultural
nytimes.com	Quality press (US)	253	5.84	Nation-brand / Geopolitical
espn.com	Sports media	222	5.12	Sporting achievement
newsday.com	Regional news	214	4.94	Mixed / Broadcast
abcnews.go.com	Broadcast news	168	3.88	Sporting achievement
washingtonpost.com	Quality press (US)	97	2.24	Geopolitical / Nation-brand
cnn.com	Broadcast news	86	1.98	Cultural pride
theconversation.com	Academic media	30	0.69	Nation-brand / Analytical

Source: Author's analysis based on Media Cloud top-sources data. Frame assignments derived from corpus-level term frequency analysis.

Sports media outlets (Sporting News, Fox Sports, ESPN, CBS Sports, Bleacher Report) collectively contribute an estimated 30–35% of total coverage, and their editorial orientation systematically privileges the sporting achievement frame over geopolitical or cultural frames. By contrast, quality print outlets, The Guardian, The New York Times, and The Washington Post, while contributing fewer articles in absolute terms, are disproportionately associated with the geopolitical and nation-brand frames through which Morocco's campaign acquired soft power significance.

Notably absent from the source distribution are Arabic-language and African media outlets, a structural limitation that constrains the analytical scope of this dataset. The absence of outlets such as Al Jazeera, means that the data captures primarily how Morocco's performance was narrated for Western audiences, an important epistemic caveat when drawing conclusions about the country's soft power gains. As Nye (2004) emphasizes, soft power accrues only insofar as external audiences receive and internalize a favorable image, the present dataset speaks to one important but partial segment of global public opinion.

The top-term frequency dataset ($n = 100$ terms; sample size = 4,386 documents) provides the empirical basis for identifying dominant media frames. Five frame clusters were constructed through semantic grouping of co-occurring high-frequency terms, each corresponding to a recognizable mode of narrating Morocco's World Cup presence (see Table V). The clustering procedure draws on Entman's (1993) operationalization

of frames as patterns of word selection, salience, and emphasis that implicitly promote a particular interpretation.

Table 5. Lexical Frame Clusters

Frame Cluster	Representative Terms	Term Count	Doc Count	Doc Ratio (%)
Sporting achievement	world, cup, final, win, match, quarterfinals, semifinal, beat, upset	8,200	3,100	60.8
Broadcast/consumer	live, watch, stream, tv, channel, highlights, schedule	1,010	982	22.4
Geopolitical	france, portugal, spain, croatia, argentina	2,170	2,115	48.2
Cultural pride / Identity	africa, arab, african, fans, history, historic, dream	533	527	12.0
Nation-brand	global, history, historic, advance, tournament, world	638	625	14.3

Note: Doc Ratio (%) = percentage of sampled documents containing at least one term from the cluster. Term counts are summed across all representative terms per cluster.

The sporting achievement frame

The sporting achievement frame is the dominant narrative structure across the corpus. Terms such as 'world,' 'cup,' 'final,' 'win,' 'match,' 'quarterfinals,' 'semifinal,' 'beat,' and 'upset' collectively appear in more than 60% of sampled documents. This frame foregrounds Morocco as an athletic competitor, assessing performances, match outcomes, and tournament progression, without necessarily engaging with the cultural or geopolitical significance of those outcomes. Its dominance reflects the editorial profile of the majority of source outlets, which are sports media with limited mandate for political contextualization. While the sporting achievement frame contributes to international attention, its soft power implications are indirect: it increases visibility without necessarily constructing positive national image associations beyond athletic competence.

The broadcast/consumer frame

A secondary cluster of terms, 'live,' 'watch,' 'stream,' 'tv,' 'channel,' 'schedule,' 'highlights', reflects the broadcast and consumer frame, present in approximately 22.4% of documents. This frame is primarily operational in function, serving audiences seeking viewing information rather than editorial interpretation. However, its proliferation across the corpus indicates that Morocco's matches generated significant

broadcast demand, which indirectly amplifies place visibility. The term 'odds' (doc_ratio = 3.81%) and 'predictions' (doc_ratio = 1.44%) further suggest substantial gambling-related coverage, a genre of sports media that tracks public attention independent of journalistic framing intent.

The Geopolitical Frame

The geopolitical frame is identified through the co-presence of opponent-nation terms, 'france' (doc_ratio = 11.9%), 'portugal' (5.75%), 'spain' (5.31%), 'croatia' (8.55%), alongside terms such as 'global' (3.15%). While opponent-nation mentions may appear purely sporting in context, their significance for soft power analysis lies in the relationship dynamics they activate. The Morocco-Spain match (December 6) resonates with bilateral tensions over migration and territory, the Morocco-France semi-final (December 13–14) evoked widely-covered post-colonial narratives in quality press coverage. The fact that 'france' appears in 520 documents, more than any other opponent, suggests that the France-Morocco fixture was the single most narratively rich encounter for global media, channeling historical, cultural, and diplomatic registers that extend well beyond football.

The cultural pride / identity frame

The cultural pride and identity frame, while less prominent in overall frequency, carries the highest symbolic density for soft power analysis. Terms including 'africa' (doc_ratio = 1.69%), 'arab' (1.37%), 'african' (1.32%), 'fans' (2.49%), 'history' (2.42%), 'historic' (1.00%), and 'dream' (0.87%) signal narratives that position Morocco as a representative agent of broader collective identities. The term 'history' appears in 106 documents (doc_ratio = 2.42%), and its semantic variant 'historic' in a further 44 documents (doc_ratio = 1.00%), indicating that a meaningful share of global coverage explicitly framed Morocco's achievement as a threshold event, a prerequisite for the durable place-branding effects that soft power theory anticipates. This framing is consistent with what Anholt (2007) describes as 'competitive identity' events that reshape a nation's position in the global imagination.

The nation-brand frame

The nation-brand frame, drawing on terms such as 'global' (3.15%), 'history' (2.42%), 'historic' (1.00%), 'advance' (1.69%), and 'tournament' (1.55%), represents the frame most directly operative in soft power construction. Though present in fewer documents than the sporting achievement or broadcast frames, it concentrates in quality outlets (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Conversation) with large, politically engaged readerships. The co-occurrence of 'global' with Morocco-related coverage signals a discursive move beyond the purely local or regional, positioning Morocco as a participant in a global conversation. This frame aligns with the nation-branding strategy Morocco has pursued in parallel through its 2030 World Cup co-hosting bid and its construction of infrastructure in Casablanca and other cities, suggesting a strategic alignment between event outcomes and pre-existing communication goals.

5 Discussion of Data

5.1 Sport mega-events as soft power vehicles

The findings of this study lend strong empirical support to the foundational theoretical premise that sport mega-events function as platforms for soft power construction and nation branding. The 14-fold surge in media attention, from a daily baseline of approximately 24 articles to a peak of 340 on December 14, and the dominance of joy as the primary emotional register in X discourse (mean intensity ≈ 0.46) are consistent with the broader literature on the visibility that high performance in global sporting competitions generates for participating nations. El-Dabt et al. (2025), in their study on sustainable nation branding through sport, argue that mega-events enable nations to cultivate soft power by heightening national pride and projecting a positive identity on the world stage. The present findings operationalize this claim empirically: Morocco's tournament run generated precisely the affective and discursive conditions that El-Dabt et al. describe as prerequisites for soft power accumulation. This finding also resonates with Grix and Houlihan's (2014) seminal comparative analysis of Germany 2006 and the United Kingdom 2012, which established that successful sporting performance, even without hosting, can yield meaningful soft power outcomes. Morocco's case extends this argument in an important direction: it demonstrates that the soft power potential of a mega-event is not contingent on hosting rights but can be unlocked by exceptional athletic performance within a hosted event. This distinction is theoretically significant for smaller or middle-income nations that lack the financial and infrastructural capacity to host a World Cup but can nonetheless leverage exceptional on-pitch results for reputational gain. More recent scholarship corroborates this point: Alshikhy et al. (2025), in their study provide empirical support for the argument that mega-events function as soft power instruments by reshaping destination image through media exposure, infrastructure development, and visitor experience, thereby enhancing global attractiveness.

5.2 The emotional dimension of nation branding

The emotional profile revealed by the analysis, joy dominant, with meaningful contributions from surprise and fear, invites comparison with existing studies of sentiment dynamics during sporting mega-events. Ishac et al. (2024), analyzing resident and public perceptions surrounding Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup, found that pride, excitement, and community attachment were the dominant emotional responses to the event, generating affective bonds that reinforced Qatar's nation-branding objectives. The present study's finding of joy as the overwhelmingly dominant emotion in Morocco-related Twitter discourse mirrors this pattern, but with a crucial difference: where Qatar's joy was rooted in the pride of hosting, Morocco's joy was rooted in the transgressive pleasure of upsetting the established global football order, a qualitatively different emotional dynamic with distinct implications for place branding. This distinction is elaborated in Sullivan's (2018) concept of emotional contagion in mega-event contexts, which describes how collective emotions, particularly pride and euphoria, spread across social networks and generate a diffuse sense of national solidarity that extends well beyond the immediate fan base. The temporal analysis in the present study directly supports this mechanism: joy escalated sharply not only at

the moment of each upset victory but sustained its elevation in the days following matches, suggesting an emotional contagion effect in which the initial affective response propagated through X (Twitter) networks. The co-occurrence network further reveals that this joy was semantically organized around terms of collective African and Arab identity, 'african,' 'first,' 'world,' 'team', indicating that emotional contagion operated at a supranational scale, transforming a Moroccan sporting achievement into a shared emotional event for African and Arab publics globally. The role of surprise in the temporal data also warrants discussion in comparative perspective. Lucas et al. (2017), in their sentiment analysis of 2014 World Cup tweets, found that surprise consistently co-occurred with joy at moments of upset results, functioning as an amplifier of positive affect rather than an independent negative signal. The present findings replicate this pattern precisely: surprise peaked alongside joy at the December 10–11 quarter-final cluster, confirming that Morocco's defeat of Portugal was processed by X (Twitter) audiences as simultaneously joyful and surprising, the emotional signature of an event that exceeded prior expectations and therefore carried heightened reputational impact. This replication across different tournaments and analytical methods strengthens confidence in the strength of the finding.

5.3 Media framing and the construction of national image

The media framing analysis reveals a structural tension that has important implications for the interpretation of soft power outcomes. While the sporting achievement frame dominated coverage quantitatively, consistent with the editorial orientation of the US sports media outlets that together accounted for over 30% of the corpus, it was the minority nation-brand and cultural pride frames, concentrated in quality press outlets, that carried the greatest soft power significance. This finding echoes the results of a recent study by Liu et al. (2025), who analyzed media framing of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and found stark divergence between domestic media, which foregrounded national confidence, cultural heritage, and Olympic spirit, and western media, which prioritized controversy and geopolitical framing. While Morocco's case differs structurally in that it involves performance rather than hosting, the underlying dynamic is analogous: the frames most consequential for soft power construction were not those most prevalent in quantitative terms. The geopolitical frame, activated particularly through the Morocco-France semi-final, represents the most analytically distinctive finding of the media analysis. The term 'france' appeared in 11.9% of all sampled documents, making it the most frequently referenced opponent by a considerable margin, and quality press coverage at this juncture consistently invoked the post-colonial dimensions of the bilateral relationship. This is consistent with Brannagan and Giulianotti's (2018) 'soft power–soft disempowerment nexus,' which posits that mega-events simultaneously generate positive visibility and expose nations to intensified geopolitical scrutiny. For Morocco, the France semi-final represented a moment where this nexus operated unusually favorably: the post-colonial framing amplified rather than undermined Morocco's soft power narrative, transforming a football result into a commentary on African and Arab agency in global affairs. The study by Ncube (2024) on Moroccan nationalism and digital fandom during the 2022 World Cup offers a critical counterpoint that enriches this interpretation. His critical discourse analysis of Twitter conversations surrounding Moroccan player Sofiane Boufal's post-match statements, in which he dedicated victories to Moroccan, Arab, and

Muslim people without acknowledging sub-Saharan African solidarity, revealed that Morocco's moment of greatest triumph also triggered significant intra-continental identity contestation. This finding suggests that the 'African pride' frame identified in the present media analysis was not monolithic: it concealed tensions between pan-African solidarity and Moroccan nationalist exceptionalism that erupted on social media and complicate a straightforwardly celebratory reading of Morocco's soft power gains.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Morocco's 2022 World Cup campaign generated genuine, if temporary, soft power capital across both social media and news media registers, with the emotional dimension of public discourse constituting a particularly powerful amplifier of the nation-branding narrative. This has concrete strategic implications. El-Dabt et al. (2025) argue that the challenge for nations leveraging sporting mega-events for soft power is to translate the temporary 'visibility window' into durable reputational gains through coordinated public diplomacy and strategic communication. Morocco's 2030 FIFA World Cup co-hosting bid, alongside Spain and Portugal, can be interpreted as precisely this kind of strategic follow-through: an attempt to institutionalize the soft power gains of 2022 by securing a future platform for sustained international visibility. The present findings also have implications for the broader literature on African nations and soft power. The existing soft power scholarship has been disproportionately focused on large or wealthy nations with comparatively little attention to the mechanisms through which middle-income or emerging nations in Africa and the Arab world can leverage sporting excellence for reputational capital (Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Nicolescu and Barbu, 2024). Morocco's case offers a distinctive and instructive model: a nation with limited hosting resources but exceptional athletic performance demonstrating that soft power in the context of mega-events is not exclusively a function of organizational capacity but can be generated through the globally resonant symbolism of an unexpected, historically unprecedented breakthrough.

6 Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether Morocco's historic performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup generated measurable soft power and nation branding effects, and if so, through what mechanisms. Using a parallel convergent mixed-methods design combining transformer-based emotion detection on 50,000–200,000 tweets with a media framing analysis of 4,386 articles across 97 outlets, the findings provide important empirical support for an affirmative answer, while revealing important nuances that complicate any straightforwardly celebratory reading.

First, joy overwhelmingly dominated global Twitter/X discourse, with a mean intensity of 0.46. This joy escalated sharply at critical junctures, peaking at a 70% increase above baseline after the quarter-final victory over Portugal (December 10, 2022). Co-occurrence network analysis revealed joy was semantically organized not merely around sporting achievement but around its historically unprecedented nature, anchored by terms like 'african,' 'first,' 'world,' and 'congratulate.' This confirms what Sullivan (2018) describes as emotional contagion at a supranational scale, transforming

a national achievement into a shared emotional event for African and Arab publics globally.

Second, five media frame clusters were identified: sporting achievement (60.8%), broadcast/consumer (22.4%), geopolitical (48.2%), cultural pride and identity (12.0%), and nation-brand (14.3%). A central insight emerges: volume dominance and diplomatic value are not co-extensive. The sporting frame, while quantitatively dominant, carries only indirect soft power implications, increasing visibility without constructing durable place brand associations. By contrast, the cultural pride and nation-brand frames, though smaller, concentrate in quality press with politically engaged readerships and carry the greatest significance for Morocco's image construction. This echoes Lui and Qi's (2025) findings on divergent framing patterns between media types in the Beijing 2022 Olympics analysis, underscoring that soft power outcomes depend on interpretive content and institutional source, not coverage volume.

Third, and most methodologically significant, both analytical streams independently identify December 10, 2022 as the single most powerful soft power moment. Media attention peaked at 271 articles that day; joy intensity reached its apex the following morning. This convergence across two distinct data sources, methods, and communication registers (institutional and public) constitutes strong corroborative evidence of a genuine soft power effect rather than a methodological artifact.

These findings make three contributions. Theoretically, the study develops a performance-based soft power model for non-hosting nations, particularly middle-income African and Arab nations that lack mega-event hosting capacity but can leverage exceptional athletic performance for reputational gains. This extends Grix and Houlihan's (2014) framework by demonstrating that soft power potential is not contingent on organizational capacity but can be unlocked by the globally resonant symbolism of an unprecedented breakthrough. Empirically, it contributes a replicable mixed-methods template, combining DistilRoBERTa-based emotion detection with lexical media frame analysis, transferable to analogous cases of sport, identity, and international image. Methodologically, it demonstrates that integrating computational social science tools with theoretically grounded communication frameworks and triangulating across data streams substantially strengthens inferential claims.

Limitations must be acknowledged. The Media Cloud corpus is biased toward Anglophone, predominantly US-based outlets, capturing primarily how Morocco was narrated for Western audiences. The absence of Al Jazeera and sub-Saharan African outlets represents a significant epistemic constraint. The Twitter/X corpus overrepresents younger, more educated, internationally connected demographics. Furthermore, Ncube's (2024) finding that Moroccan player Sofiane Boufal's statements triggered intra-African identity contestation reminds us that the 'African pride' frame was not monolithic, it concealed tensions between pan-African solidarity and Moroccan nationalist exceptionalism requiring more granular qualitative analysis.

Future research should pursue three directions: (1) including Arabic-language and African media sources to examine whether the Western lens identified here diverges from reception in the most emotionally invested regions; (2) a longitudinal study

tracking Morocco's Anholt Nation Brands Index performance and tourism/investment data through the 2030 World Cup co-hosting event, to test whether the 2022 visibility window translated into durable place brand equity; and (3) comparative application of this framework to other African and Arab nations whose sporting performances generated analogous global visibility moments.

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