

FIFA 2022 World Cup Crisis Response

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Introduction: Soccer, FIFA, and the 2022 World Cup Hosted in Qatar

Kickoff for the 2022 FIFA World Cup took place in November of that year in the Middle Eastern nation of Qatar. Only occurring once every four years the World Cup is a highly anticipated event for soccer¹ fans around the globe. However, since 2010 when FIFA, the governing body of football, awarded Qatar the 2022 World Cup the organization has faced an onslaught of controversies. The scandals range from accusations of bribery and corruption directly following Qatar's appointment, to worker abuse that led to the reported deaths of some 6,500 forced or low-paid laborers made to build the stadium where the tournament would be played (*Revealed*, 2021), to the host nation's last-minute announcement that they would not be selling alcohol at any of the matches. Beyond that, many soccer fans were further dismayed at FIFA's decision to take up shop in a country that curtails the rights of LGBT+ individuals and women. This prolonged web of scandals that unfolded predominately between 2010 and 2022 spelled out major trouble for the reputation and respectability of FIFA.

The Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was founded in 1904 and has since worked to promote the federation's mission: "*Promote the game of Association Football [...], to foster friendly relations among National Association, Confederations, and their officials and players, by promoting the organization of football matches at all levels, and to control every type of association football by taking steps as shall be deemed necessary or advisable*" (FIFA). As the governing body of the sport, FIFA is in charge of all facets of the game. They regulate the rules, organize international championship tournaments, set the standards for players and their coaches, and encourage the innovation of soccer.

Soccer, by a vast margin, is the world's most popular sport. *World Population Review* reports that soccer has roughly 3.5 billion fans and 250 million players worldwide (2024). Thus, when the premier governing body of the sport fumbles, it is felt around the world.

Background

Before the spread of the allegations and criticism from the public, there was a choice to be made in 2010: who would receive hosting privileges for the 2022 FIFA World Cup? In 2010, Qatar beat South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. They earned the right to host in 2022 and became the first Middle Eastern country to hold the World Cup (Sullivan, 2022). It was a monumental step with its own burdens, and a damaged reputation, to come after the following years.

The pick of Qatar became controversial in a few different areas concerning corruption/ bribery, residents, workers' rights, and cultural beliefs. These issues played on for over a decade leading up to the major sporting event, and prior FIFA president Sepp Blatter even said that the choice was a mistake (Sullivan, 2022). Problems began right off the bat in 2011 with allegations that Qatar bought the rights to host the world cup for an estimate of 3.7 million dollars (BBC, 2022). The rumor started with FIFA vice president Jack Warner and his link to a firm based in Qatar. In 2014, Warner was allegedly paid two million dollars to give Qatar hosting rights. Speculation around Warner was not taken lightly and in 2015 he was banned from football activities for life after he violated their code of ethics (Furcoi, 2022). Along with his exile from the organization, 12 other FIFA officials involved in the selection of Qatar have been banned. These rumors and accusations left a scarlet letter on the entire event. And although FIFA found

¹ Throughout this essay we will use the term soccer to refer to this sport, but in some cases (I.E. within quotations) the term football will be used.

no hard evidence of bribery to own hosting rights, along with a report that proved a fair voting process, the corruption accusations stood out during this world event.

Once the investigations between FIFA and Qatar finally settled down, attention shifted towards how the event was going to come together. Qatar managed to build eight stadiums, 100 hotels, one metro system, and an extension to the Hamad International Airport all for the World Cup. None of this infrastructure would have been possible without the help of migrant workers, since 85% of Qatar's population are foreigners (BBC, 2022). This may seem like a positive for Qatar's population to find work, but the visas of migrant workers are tied to their employers, which leads to blurred lines of freedom. The abuse of visa guidelines was just the beginning of mistreatment for migrant workers, in 2013 an investigation found that working conditions in Qatar were close to modern day slavery. Migrant workers suffered serious accidents that sometimes were fatal, car crashes, suicides, and heat induced incidents that caused 6,500 workers to pass from 2010 to 2022 (Sullivan, 2022). Aside from the harsh working conditions, migrant workers were forced to stay in the country and keep their jobs since they did not have permission to leave without their employers' approval. Once they gained the right to switch employers or leave Qatar, they were bombarded with threats, exploitation by sponsors, and delayed exit permits. The rules and restrictions bounced around and migrant workers were constantly fighting for fair welfare standards, wages, exit permits, and compensation of lost lives, but they were never accommodated for putting their lives on the line for stadiums and hotels (Sullivan, 2022).

After the immense growth of infrastructure was completed, it was time for the teams and fans to come piling in. The acknowledgment of the lives lost to create the stadiums and hotels made it difficult for visitors, but what added on to the stress were the cultural beliefs of Qatar. Qatar has two beliefs that largely contrast with those of the U.S. The first issue is that Qatar has negative views towards the LGBTQ community, the country believes that homosexuality is immoral under Islamic Sharia. Any sexual acts between same sex couples are illegal and it can be punishable by seven to three years in prison, fines, conversion therapy, and death by stoning (BBC, 2022). These beliefs were not pushed onto visitors, as Qatar's World Cup organizers stated that everyone was welcome and would not face discrimination, but they did ask visitors to respect their culture. The second issue includes sexuality as well, but this code refers to sex outside of marriage. Qatar's penal code criminalizes these actions, and it has led to the prosecution of rape victims. These customs are impossible to support which left visiting teams and fans feeling silenced once they entered the country.

The inequality towards migrant workers, injustice of corruption, and disdain towards the LGBTQ community has left Qatar with a tainted mark after the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Their actions and beliefs were against FIFA's human rights policy that prohibits discrimination and allows freedom of sexual orientation and other identities.

Problem Identification: Numerous Human Rights Violations, Corruption in FIFA Leadership, and "Sportswashing"

FIFA's decision to accept Qatar's bid to be the host of the 2022 World Cup was met with widespread disapproval due to the country's restrictive laws and culture. On top of the political implications of hosting the tournament in Qatar, there was no shortage of logistical challenges either. For one, Qatar's proximity to the equator meant that their summers regularly reach over 100 degrees. Due to these extreme conditions, FIFA opted to move the tournament to the winter months rather than hosting in the summer as is routine. Critics interpreted this decision as proof

of FIFA's corruption and the extent to which they were willing to go to please the already controversial Qatar (Ward, 2022).

You may be wondering why Qatar was a controversial choice to begin with and the answer is both simple and nuanced. At a basic level, the fact that Qatar is the smallest nation to ever host the World Cup raised red flags for some. For reference, the entire country is smaller in size than the state of Connecticut by about 20% (Sullivan, 2022). Furthermore, Qatar lacked all of the infrastructure necessary to host an event of this size; hotels and accommodations for fans, players, and workers, stadiums to play in, and media stations to stream the event. Starting in 2010 Qatar began a massive construction campaign to prepare five of its cities to host the tournament. A campaign of this size had insurmountable impacts on the small nation. For one, Qatar uses an oppressive labor system known as 'Kafala.' The Georgetown University College of International Affairs described the Kafala as such: "*Under this system, states give employers sponsorship permits to bring in foreign workers, which bind workers to their employers and allow for exploitation*" (Cholewinski, 2023). Migrant workers, who were "employed" to help erect the host site for the World Cup, operated in treacherous conditions. A Guardian Report found that since the start of the project, more than 6,500 foreign workers have lost their lives (Sullivan, 2022). Additionally, some migrant workers reported their passports being confiscated and their wages stolen (Saafein, 2022).

Soccer fans and humanitarian activists identified further human rights issues within the penal code of Qatar. LGBTQ+ culture and behavior are strongly condemned in Qatar. Upon investigation of Qatari laws surrounding homosexuality, NPR stated that:

Sex between men is punishable by up to seven years in prison, and men who "instigate" or "entice" another man to commit "an act of sodomy or immorality" could face one to three years' imprisonment (Sullivan, 2022).

This harsh sentiment left many queer soccer fans, players, and their allies feeling like FIFA did not care about them. Adding fuel to the fire, security at the event prohibited fans wearing anything with a rainbow on it from entering the stadium (Church, 2022). A slew of other restrictive laws and cultural rules upset many fans who were unused to Qatari culture. To name a few, it was recommended that fans, particularly women, dress modestly in public by not showing their shoulders or wearing short skirts or shorts; swearing and rude gestures are considered obscene; intimacy in public as innocent as holding hands was advised against, even for heterosexual couples (Lane, 2022); lack of freedom of expression; and Qatar's rule that citizens and media are not allowed to criticize the government or politically rally against it (Saafein, 2022).

Likewise, many fans had concerns about Qatar's strict alcohol laws. Consuming beer and other alcoholic beverages is a significant part of the viewership culture at soccer matches. As an Islamic country, the sale of alcohol is strictly regulated in Qatar (Lane, 2022). Drinking and being drunk in public is punishable by jail time and fines. When Qatar's bid was first accepted, FIFA and Qatar brushed off these concerns by announcing the plan that soccer fans would be able to purchase alcohol at designated stations throughout the stadium, much like a traditional stadium would have. However, a mere two days before kick-off the Qatari royal family announced that alcohol would be banned from stadiums (Lane, 2022).

Beyond controversial laws within Qatar, FIFA has long faced accusations of corruption within its administration. Many fans are concerned with how FIFA has chosen to respond to the developing criticism of their corruption. Joseph 'Sepp' Blatter, a Swiss businessman and sports executive, served as the president of FIFA between 1998 and 2015. Sepp Blatter's tenure is

characterized by massive profits and the growth of soccer in new and developing markets, but it was spoiled by widespread business misconduct within the organization (Rollin, 2024). Sepp Blatter faced accusations of bribing board members with upwards of \$50,000 each if they voted for him to be the president of FIFA (Saafein, 2022). Furthermore, Sepp Blatter faced serious allegations of accepting monetary bribes in exchange for awarding the 2018 and 2022 World Cup Finals to Russia and Qatar, respectively. In response to these allegations, investigative bureaus in multiple countries launched investigations into Sepp Blatter and associated sports officials accused of similar allegations of misconduct. Sepp Blatter resigned in the face of this scandal and was suspended by FIFA's ethics committee for some time. Later, Sepp Blatter received a guilty verdict with charges of ethics violations (Rollin, 2024).

An emerging civic trend in sports is the phenomenon of 'sportswashing.' While there is no definitive explanation of sportswashing it is generally understood as the use of a sporting event by a government to improve their reputation (Towriss, 2022). In the context of the 2022 World Cup, the sheer popularity and the passion that fans have for the sport (soccer) is harnessed by a state (Qatar) as a tool to improve both international and domestic relations (boost tourism, revenue, and Qatar's reputation.) The misconduct surrounding FIFA and its decision to work with Qatar is most simply understood as sportswashing.

Analysis/Key Concepts

The three concepts that will analyze this case study are crisis communication, DEI, and issue management. The issues that will be covered will consist of the corruption/ bribery allegations, discrimination towards the LGBTQ community, and lack of workers' rights.

FIFA's reputation suffered a tremendous amount when it came time for Qatar to host the World Cup. The allegations that Qatar bought the right to host began in 2010, but multiple efforts were made to shut these theories down. FIFA and Qatar's World Cup organizers used crisis communication to fight these claims through reports, investigations, and statements. Not all of these were directly from the organizations, but they interacted with the media enough to connect their side of the story to the information that was publicized. These efforts began with FIFA releasing a report to refute the allegations of Qatar buying out the World Cup host decision. The report showed a voting process that incorporated fair and inclusive practices. Along with that, FIFA stated that there was no firm evidence of Qatar paying millions to host in 2022 (Furco, 2022). This is direct communication between FIFA and their audience full of sports fans, politicians, and world leaders. It shows that the organization is trying to calm the situation down with factual evidence and kill the wildfire of lies. Another instance of crisis communication came from a situation with Qatar's migrant workers and the death toll from building the stadiums, hotels, and metro system. There were said to be 6,500 casualties from the construction sites, but FIFA stated that only three people died as a direct result of working on the World Cup sites. FIFA did acknowledge the death of 37 workers that were "non-work-related", but they did not claim the 6,500 deaths, instead the organization said that the difference in deaths came from foreign who have lived in Qatar and did not work on the World Cup (BBC, 2022). These are two different situations, but each time the organization has come with a statement that is full of information meant to be seen as factual and resourceful. These tactics were used to refresh their reputation and earn the trust of their audience back.

Gaining the respect back from FIFA fans proved to be difficult during the World Cup games, and the lack of DEI from Qatar's organizations helped fans move further away from the sport. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are highly important in any company or organization today,

and because of Qatar's cultural beliefs, they did not score well on this section. The country of Qatar believes that homosexuality is illegal, and it can be punished by serving prison time, participating in conversion therapy, or paying a fine (BBC, 2022). Because of these regulations, Qatar's stadiums did not allow their players to wear "one love" armbands and not a single jersey kit could represent support for the LGBTQ community. This backlash from the organization caused teams to post photos with their hands covering their mouths. This action represented their feelings of being silenced in Qatar and their inability to express themselves authentically (Adair, 2022). One positive step forward that came out of pushing Qatar's boundaries for inclusion was that rainbow flags were allowed in the stadiums. At first, rainbow flags were not to be tolerated in any of the eight stadiums, but that regulation changed as more push back came from their audience. This change was made to please the audience and players that were dedicating their time to the sport, and Qatar had to understand the pressure that was put on their organization.

Allowing rainbow flags was a small step the Qatar organization took since the real actions happened on the FIFA side of business. FIFA used the skill of issue management when it came time to cut high ranking representatives of the organization. This took place when the spotlight was put on the working conditions of the migrants constructing the World Cup sites. Reports were released stating that Qatar abused and exploited their migrant workers. FIFA took the allegations and reviewed Qatar's hosting rights. FIFA studied a 430-page report made by a U.S. prosecutor and it explained the workers' rights issues to corruption (Furcoi, 2022). After this review, Qatar entered an agreement with the international labor organization, and they reformed the working conditions and the sponsorship system in place. Following the change within the sponsorship program, the migrants were also given a monthly minimum wage and they were given the freedom to switch employers if they were mistreated at the site. This type of issue management kept the public informed about the changes that were being made for the migrant workers and Qatar followed up with planned actions to improve the working conditions and benefits.

The different issues that FIFA and Qatar faced diffused into many areas and called for consistent reevaluations. This report found that crisis communication, DEI, and issue management were the best tools that guided this organization through a difficult and unpredicted time.

Strategies, Tactics, and The Outcomes

FIFA launched several public relations strategies and tactics to address the issues surrounding the World Cup crisis. Crisis management strategies during the 2022 FIFA World Cup held in Qatar included a robust safety protocol, connecting with the public through various forms of communication and coordinating with local authorities in an attempt to keep the game's fans happy and distracted.

FIFA's crisis management communications were based around the three C's: Concern, Control, and Commitment. The organizers could have focused on better communication strategies to quickly and efficiently resolve any already prevalent issues as well as any new problems that arose throughout the process to ensure the safety of the workers and the spectators. Most would say that FIFA did not handle this crisis well, but if we break down some public relations strategies, we can see what went wrong and what they could have done to manage the crisis better.

The organization claimed it promoted transparent and clear communication with Qatari civilians and spectators who came to view the game. Leading up to the games, FIFA launched a

sustainability campaign that aimed to help Qatar before, during, and after the World Cup. Qatar stated that they will improve labor laws, allow LGBTQ+ individuals into the stadium, and allow displays of LGBTQ+ rights in the stadium. (Loanes 2022) While FIFA promoted the World Cup as a welcome event for all who wanted to watch and attend the game, The ruling body of Qatar still asked everyone to respect the country's culture, leaving the fans and the players feeling uneasy and protesting.

One of the big draws to any sporting event is drinking. Having a beer with your friends while watching the game also generates massive revenue for local bars, tourism, and marketing

for whichever alcohol company will be the official sponsor. However, what do you do if the country hosting it has a strict no-alcohol law? Budweiser, who has been the official World Cup beer for thirty-six years, was not allowed to sell alcohol in the stadium. The strategy used for this crisis was Budweiser, which released Budweiser Zero at the last minute. This was a zero percent alcohol that tasted just like the real thing; there was only no alcohol, resulting in the ability to sell in the stadium. Fans were less than thrilled, but in a moment of crisis, they could still profit and market themselves. A sponsorship marketing expert stated, "I have been involved with the FIFA World Cup



for several editions, and I have never seen anything like it." He goes on to state that he estimated that around five million dollars was spent on operation costs that Budweiser had to spend to be able to transport the beer to Qatar. (Lyall 2022) This public relations strategy yielded a somewhat mixed outcome from fans. While most fans are simply there for the joy of the sport and did not care about having alcohol, others were outraged by the option of either purchasing a Match Hospitality package, which ranges from \$ 950 to \$4,950 per patch (Church 2022) or consuming the zero percent alcohol beer.

FIFA launched a Sustainability Management System (SMS) to combat the backlash surrounding the game in Qatar. FIFA and Qatar set out to build several new stadiums for the World Cup. All of these venues were designed with sustainability in mind. The stadiums were designed with energy-efficient and water-efficient irrigation systems while minimizing their carbon footprint and environmental impacts. In a letter to FIFA, several ecologically minded professional players stated: "The tournament has been labeled as the first 'fully carbon neutral FIFA World Cup tournament,' meaning its overall impact on the planet should be zero...but that is not true." They go on to say that the SMS plan rests on a "flawed carbon calculation... and shifting the responsibility onto fans rather than shouldering it themselves." (Oliveira, Smith 2022) Through this public relations strategy, we can see that FIFA made extreme efforts to rectify their wrongdoings.

Ethical Considerations

The decision to bring the FIFA World Cup to Qatar raises a multitude of ethical concerns. For one, FIFA advocating for an extremely controversial country, but also dishonesty regarding their sustainability pledge. On a now defunct web page, FIFA promised that the 2022 World Cup would be the organization's first carbon neutral event. However, in a report authored by Gilles Dufrasne, a policy officer and climate researcher at Carbon Market Watch (CMW) it was publicized that FIFA's claims were severely embellished and used a dubious methodology that misrepresented the success of the initiative. Dufrasne estimates of FIFA's reporting, "This probably underestimates the [tournament's] emissions by about 1.4 megatonnes — or 1.4 million tons — and that's quite a conservative estimate. Adding that to their existing estimate, their total footprint is closer to 5 megatonnes rather than the 3.6 megatonnes that they have announced." FIFA's plan to make up the project's substantial carbon output amounted to buying large numbers of carbon offsets. This strategy is common, a corporation can fund a different environmental initiative that would offset the emissions made from their own. Nonetheless, organizers would need to buy 3.6 million credits and as of the writing of CMW's report, have purchased less than 200,000. (DuFrasne 2022) By posturing as environmentally friendly and skirting responsibility for claims they made leading up to, and in the promotion of their event, FIFA hurts their own credibility with the public. Not hitting the emissions target could be an honest mistake, the result of poor planning, but by attempting to manipulate the numbers they veer into an unethical area. In the future, FIFA should have transparent accounting and a more defined plan to meet their target of being carbon neutral by 2040. Involving an independent third party in their calculations would ensure that their conclusions don't have a spin. The organizers should also re-evaluate their sustainability partnerships. For example, the Global Carbon Council, which FIFA bought carbon offsets from is connected to the Qatari state (Ward 2022) this naturally presents a conflict of interest given the tourism that hosting the World Cup brings being an incentive to overstate the effectiveness of their carbon offset projects.

The field of public relations is one where professionals owe loyalty to their clients as they help them navigate crisis situations, even when the client is at fault. However, they're also accountable to a code of ethics, when clients are engaged in illegality or human rights abuses like the ones seen in Qatar, the response must be apologetic and severe. Changes must be made to whatever policies allowed such things to arise in connection to their company. Analysis from The Guardian suggests more than 6,500 migrant workers died in the country since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar. Nick McGeehan, a director at an advocacy group focused on labor rights in the Gulf region says in relation to the figure, "A very significant proportion of the migrant workers who have died since 2011 were only in the country because Qatar won the right to host the World Cup." FIFA's response to these claims was lackluster at times, and indignant at others. In the hours leading up to the opening match, FIFA President Gianni Infantino lashed out at reporters at a press conference in Doha accusing them of racism and referred to himself being "crucified" (Infantino 2022). Hoping to change their tune after the outburst, FIFA deputy secretary general Alasdair Bell did damage control at a Council of Europe session on labor rights in Qatar. Bell expressed interest in a reparations fund for workers injured in the construction of their stadiums (Dunbar 2022) in response to Amnesty International who had suggested FIFA contribute roughly 440 million to the worker's cause - a figure similar to the payout received by the teams. But despite having made 7.5 billion from the event (Lyjak 2022), the plan for

reparations never came to fruition, even though it would've meant donating just 5.8% of that record breaking profit. The bare minimum to rectify this situation would be to pay money to those injured and killed in the construction of FIFA's event, not only for the sake for FIFA's public perception but because it's the morally just thing to do. A preventative measure to stop this from happening again would be to devise stricter guidelines for the countries eligible to participate in the bidding process for the World Cup. On this account, FIFA has been partially successful. The document used for the 2026 bid outlines that a country must provide specific commitments and information on the state of human and labor rights in their country. But it's unclear how rigorous this vetting is in practice. One of the bids to host the 2026 World Cup was from Morocco. Had they won, the World Cup would've been hosted in a country where homosexual acts and premarital sex are punishable by imprisonment and freedom of speech is heavily curbed (Human Rights Watch 2016). Adhering to their stated values and processes would prevent a similar scandal, and more deaths, from happening in the future.

Conclusions

The Qatar case demonstrates how PR strategies need to have strong follow through and implementation to be effective. The sustainability plan would've been a way to garner good will following the controversial construction of the stadiums, but by taking shady accounting shortcuts, the good is marred with controversy. Similarly, the Budweiser Zero campaign was a fair attempt at mitigating the cultural differences between visiting soccer fans and the host country. But both campaigns fell short in addressing the core issue, which was that Qatar was elected in a corrupt bidding process and should've never been a contender due to their history of human rights abuses. A key takeaway from the case is that public relations professionals should be focused on being proactive and preventative, mitigating controversies sooner rather than later after damage has already been done. And finally, it's a cautionary tale of a company failing to adjust to the world today. When they were founded in 1904, FIFA had to answer to a very different set of values. People now are more global than ever and their concern for the environment and human rights should be one of the foremost things considered when trying to reach them.

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