

# The 2022 World Cup and the Ethics of Spectacle

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*A publication-style reflection on crisis communication, human rights, environmental claims, and the responsibilities of global sport.*

*The crisis was not only that problems emerged. The deeper issue was that many of the problems were visible before the spectacle began.*

Originally written as a class essay. Reframed for publication with the original argument and voice preserved.

## **OPENING REFLECTION**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was not only a sporting event. It became a global case study in what happens when spectacle, money, national image, human rights, and environmental responsibility all collide on the world stage. The tournament was held from November 20 to December 18, and although the soccer itself drew worldwide attention, the event was surrounded by controversy before it ever began.

Qatar was awarded the tournament in 2010 and then took on a massive development project. Stadiums, roads, hotels, transportation systems, and other forms of infrastructure had to be built for a country preparing to host one of the largest sporting events in the world. Yet the labor that made this possible was primarily carried by migrant workers from South Asia and Africa. Investigations and public criticism from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch brought attention to exploitation, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and other harmful systems.

The tournament also raised serious concerns for the LGBTQ+ community because of Qatar's anti-LGBTQ laws. These laws created global outrage and made some athletes, supporters, and advocacy groups feel excluded from the event. Alongside these issues, Qatar's carbon-neutral claims were criticized because the event was estimated to produce millions of tonnes of CO2 emissions. Water consumption for turf maintenance in Qatar's arid climate added another layer to the environmental criticism. For these reasons, the tournament became one of the most controversial World Cups in history.

## **A PREVENTABLE CRISIS**

The Qatar 2022 World Cup represents a preventable crisis. The crisis was preventable because many of the concerns were visible long before the tournament began. Organizational mismanagement, ethical violations regarding labor, disregard for the LGBTQ+ community, and environmental challenges were not sudden surprises. They were present before Qatar hosted the event and even before the tournament was fully built around the country.

FIFA and the Qatari government could have mitigated some of the public backlash with greater foresight, transparency, and ethical responsibility. Instead, they failed to act proactively, and the result was a controversial outcome that damaged public trust. In this sense, the crisis was not simply the presence of controversy. The crisis was the failure to address foreseeable problems before they became the defining story of the event.

## **HOW FIFA AND QATAR RESPONDED**

Once FIFA and the Qatari government responded to the crisis, they did so through public relations measures, legal reforms, and messaging campaigns spread around the globe. FIFA President Gianni Infantino led much of the public communication, though his effort resulted in even more controversy. In a press conference before the tournament began, he accused the West of hypocrisy and said he felt like a migrant worker. Rather than calming the criticism, this kind of messaging intensified it.

FIFA's media campaign attempted to show that Qatar had implemented labor reforms and was improving its practices. Worker grievance systems were promoted as evidence that workers were being cared for. Yet FIFA officials were still criticized for sounding defensive and for minimizing valid

concerns. The public response suggested that FIFA's communication lacked empathy and transparency, which harmed credibility with fans, the media, and key stakeholders.

FIFA also failed to engage with advocacy groups in meaningful ways. LGBTQ+ communities were moved to the sidelines, reducing trust even further. When an organization faces a crisis involving human rights, silence or defensiveness toward affected groups becomes part of the crisis itself. Communication cannot simply protect the institution. It must also acknowledge the people harmed or excluded by the institution's decisions.

### **CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND IMAGE REPAIR**

Examining the crisis through Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit's Image Repair Theory, FIFA and Qatar appear to have used a mixture of diminish, deny, and limited corrective action strategies. Infantino publicly rejected much of the criticism and framed the situation as political and cultural rather than as a legitimate ethical concern. This was a denial approach, and it backfired because it seemed to discredit critics rather than listen to them.

FIFA also diminished its perceived responsibility by emphasizing cultural differences and arguing that progress was being made in Qatar. While reforms did occur, observers argued that some changes came too late and had gaps in implementation. In this way, the corrective action was weakened because it appeared reactive rather than proactive.

Overall, the strategy was not effective in restoring the reputation of FIFA or Qatar. By denying claims, deflecting criticism, and leaning on cultural boundaries, scrutiny intensified. Reforms that could have been part of an ethical foundation became part of a damage-control strategy. FIFA diminished its global reputation, and the controversy created renewed debate about the future of the World Cup and where it should take place.

### **THE TARES MODEL**

FIFA's communication can also be examined through the TARES model: truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility. First, FIFA struggled with truthfulness through the carbon-neutral claim, which environmental groups criticized. Second, FIFA's defensive tone made its communication seem inauthentic. It appeared more focused on protecting image than correcting wrongdoings, and ironically, this made the image worse.

Respect was also missing from the communication strategy. When Infantino dismissed criticism as Western hypocrisy, he disrespected stakeholders, especially those aligned with the LGBTQ+ community or with labor advocacy. Equity was also a concern because migrant workers, LGBTQ+ communities, and other affected parties were not given equal standing in the conversation. One could argue that FIFA respected Qatari cultural norms, but that argument becomes incomplete when respect for one system appears to come at the expense of vulnerable groups.

Finally, regarding social responsibility, FIFA had an opportunity to advocate for real change. Instead, it prioritized reputation over transformation. This failure did not reflect a commitment to societal welfare. Through the TARES model, FIFA's response violated each major ethical category and missed an opportunity to inspire higher standards for global sport.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar highlighted major concerns around human rights, environmental responsibility, and the ethics of global sport. FIFA's crisis communication strategy failed to restore its reputation because it did not adequately address the deeper problems beneath the event. A tournament of this size cannot be judged only by what happens on the field. It must also be judged by the structures that make the spectacle possible.

Moving forward, sports organizations must prioritize ethical responsibility, transparent communication, and meaningful action. Global sport has the power to unite people, but that power becomes diminished when the event is built on preventable harm. A better legacy requires more than entertainment. It requires responsibility, fairness, and a willingness to place human dignity above institutional image.

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## **ORIGINAL STUDY CONTEXT**

This piece began as a class essay for ESS 440. The original paper examined the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar through the lenses of crisis communication, image repair, the TARES model, labor rights, LGBTQ+ exclusion, and environmental criticism.

For publication, the essay has been reordered and lightly refined. The central argument remains the same: the crisis surrounding Qatar 2022 was preventable, and FIFA's response failed because it emphasized reputation management more than ethical accountability.