An Analysis of Players, Teams and Trends as the World Cup Kicks Off this Weekend

While the World Cup is historically a source of national pride for competing nations, the globalization of the sport of soccer and the expansion of coverage of top soccer leagues from around the world also creates the opportunity for sports fans to build a strong sense of fandom for athletes from around the globe. Therefore, while we would expect fans to cheer for their "home" nation and athletes in the upcoming World Cup, we also recognize that fans may have cheering alliances that reside outside national borders. Using the United States as example, its fans have increasingly chosen favorite teams and players from international leagues such as the English Premier League (EPL) and Spain's LaLiga, both which employ star athletes from around the world. Thus, it is likely that fans across the globe may have rooting interests outside of their home nation.

This paper will address this issue. Specifically, it will address who people are rooting for and discussing on social media around the upcoming World Cup. American soccer fans, for example, are largely attracted to international star players and teams with the greatest prestige such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi who bring their respective national teams of Portugal and Argentina into the global spotlight. Both players are among the most-followed people on

Instagram, with Ronaldo in the top position and Messi fifth. Other leading national teams such as Germany, Brazil, Spain, France, and England historically draw global interest due to a wide range of recognizable players and a history of success. Even less historically successful nations can attract strong support through star players. For example, four of the top five most viewed matches on US television in the 2018 World Cup featured Croatia, who were led by Real Madrid star Luka Modric.

In addition to examining fandom in World Cup spectatorship, this study will also examine the impact of increasingly legalized sports gambling on World Cup spectator habits. The global spectator sports market was valued at nearly $165 billion in 2021 and is expected to reach $354 billion in 2026 and $597 billion in 2031 ([The Business Research Company](), 2022). While gambling has always been an important part of sports spectatorship, the increased ease of access to online gambling in the US and other nations could drastically impact the conversation around the 2022 World Cup. In the US, a new era of sports gambling began with a Supreme Court decision in 2018 that paved the way for states other than Nevada to regulate sports betting. As a result, Americans in 20 states now have access to legal sports gambling through websites like DraftKings, Caesars, and FanDuel. This brings the US far more in parallel with other nations that allow if not encourage online sports gaming. It is unsurprising, then, to learn that in a recent survey the American Gaming Association found that most betters who plan to wager on the World Cup will do so online. Overall, their research

found that American adults are planning to bet a total of $1.8 billion on the upcoming tournament (American Gaming Association, 2022, link). Therefore, this study will also examine trending conversations around sports gambling and the World Cup.

Method

Social media data were collected on Twitter and analyzed to gauge favorite teams and players in this 2022 World Cup. Keywords and hashtags were derived from researching top stars leading the World Cup discussion on news media. Social media posts were collected for a month between October 17, 2022 - November 16, 2022 using hashtags and keywords pertaining to FIFA World Cup (#Fifaworldcup, #worldcup2022) and leading iconic soccer favorites such as Messi, Ronaldo, and gambling ("odds," "favorite team," "gambling," etc.).

Results

Favorite Players

A total of 319,427 tweets, with the potential impressions of 4.7 billion, were collected on World Cup's most anticipated soccer players in the English language. Messi was identified as the most popular soccer player with over 125,116 tweets. Trending topics included the following: his picks for the winning teams ("Messi picks France and Brazil as favorites to win"); how this will be his fifth and last World Cup; fan support for Messi and Argentina ("We will go to war for Lionel

Messi in the World Cup"); Messi's commercials and his role as an ambassador with Byju; fan display of extreme fandom ("Soccer fans in India's Kerala put up giant cutouts of Lionel Messi and Neymar on a local river to celebrate the upcoming #FIFAWorldCup"); AI predictions of Messi winning the trophy; and references to Messi as the Greatest of All Time (GOAT – often referred to an emoji of a goat (🐐)).

Christiano Ronaldo was the second most discussed player with 104,528 mentions. Frequently discussed topics/terms included Manchester United , Ronaldo's World Cup history, and Portugal as a likely semi-finalist. Similar to Messi, Ronaldo is also often referred to as the GOAT. Less conversation was found for Brazilian soccer star Neymar – and unlike with the aforementioned stars, this conversation included far more negative sentiment. Whereas some still held high expectations for Brazil and Neymar, some speculated that Neymar can't be depended upon to win the cup for Brazil, referencing previous World Cup disappointment.

Gambling

76,627 English language social media posts were collected around sports gambling and the World Cup. With almost 2 Billion potential impressions, and 84% positive sentiment rate, users viewed betting on their favorite teams positively. The most common mentioned bet to win the Cup was for Argentina – #Argentina and #SaludoAlbiceleste was used most frequently. Additionally, many posts encouraged social media users to engage with their content or

incentivized sports betting on their gambling site by asking for their predictions and picks, and much attention was paid to World Cup predictions by media such as ESPN FC.

Crypto.com is an official sponsor and exclusive cryptocurrency trading platform sponsor of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. It seems other crypto related gambling sites jumped on this opportunity as NFT and crypto gambling dominated conversations regarding predictions and bettings. Duelbits, a crypto casino, was the most frequently mentioned online gambling site, and it was most frequently associated with predictions favoring Argentina. Many crypto sites invite fans to join their sites, select their favorite team, purchase their NFT, and offered incentives and rewards.

Conclusion

While the World Cup brings sports nationalism to the forefront, an analysis of social media reveals that star players likely dominate rooting interests more than home nations do, a realization of the globalization of soccer, a sport that increasingly exists without national borders. This may have a strong impact on how and who sports fans choose to watch. It should also be considered by networks as they make content and programming decisions, ones historically based on more basic national interests. In this regard, the World Cup may deviate from Olympic broadcasts, where national pride reigns supreme. Finally, it is clear that online gambling is an important topic for the World Cup, and fans are likely to alter viewing habits from past Cups based on this increased prevalence.

Additionally, the focus on cryptocurrency demonstrates the changing landscape of sports and economics. Given the increasingly unstable landscape of crypto, it is critical to see how the convergence of crypto based gambling during the Cup impacts the overall viewing experience.

Brands and Influencers Scoring Goals in Social Media Conversation: An Analysis of World Cup Trends

The FIFA World Cup is a massive sporting event laden with ads and sponsorships from prominent brands such as adidas, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Pepsi, and Nike. The global sponsorship market is a colossal force with its value at $57 billion in 2020 and the expected value to reach $89.6 billion by 2027 ([The Business Research Company](#), 2022). Given that FIFA projects that 5 billion people will watch at least some of the upcoming World Cup in Qatar, there is a tremendous incentive to capitalize on the globe's interest in soccer (Nielsen, 2022, [link](#)). There is a long history of corporate sponsorship associated with the World Cup. German athletics giant Adidas was the first company to partner with FIFA, providing the first official ball to the World Cup. The ensuing decades of cross promotion has been described by adidas as "one of the longest and most

successful partnerships in modern sports marketing history" (adidas, 2013, para 1 [link]). Coca-Cola followed shortly thereafter, becoming a worldwide sponsor of the World Cup in 1978. Fast forward nearly five decades, and FIFA has divided its sponsorship programs into a series of tiers to include sponsorships from adidas, Coca-Cola, Visa, Hyundai/Kia, Wanda, Qatar Airways, and Qatar Energy as well as Budweiser, McDonald's, Crypto.com, and Hisense, among others.

Despite politically charged controversies with the World Cup being held in Qatar, brands are pushing out campaigns to seize the once-every-four-years opportunity to reach audiences around the world. Advertisers aim to focus on soccer and leverage the global popularity of the World Cup to elevate their brands through a variety of product placements, gameday sales, and activations. Furthermore, with 82% of American soccer fans checking social media during a match, many advertisers are looking to social-first campaigns (Nielsen, 2022). Many commercials featured celebrities and athlete stars to attract more fans to the game. For example, Hyundai partnered with BTS to ride the high tides of k-pop, while Mariah Carey, Tom Brady and Jon Hamm appear in campaigns by Fox Sports. Argentina's star soccer player Lionel Messi appeared alongside numerous brands such as Pepsi, Gatorade, Byju's, and David Beckham emerged as the ambassador for FIFA World Cup as well as appearing in commercials like Frito-Lay.

This study will examine social media posts around the World Cup and corporate sponsors and brands. By measuring content and sentiment, it will

assess which brands are most associated with the World Cup and whether these brand associations are viewed positively or negatively.

Method

Social media is a powerful social networking tool that enables individuals to connect, share and move global audiences. The Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup expectedly garnered much attention from the social media sphere, and an immense influx of social media posts were observed over a period of a month, beginning October 15, 2022.

Over the period of a month beginning October 15, 2022, posts were collected and analyzed using keywords and hashtags appearing with "*#Fifaworldcup"* and "*2022 world cup"* along with ad, sponsor, commercial, campaign, partner, celebrity. 170,532 posts on Twitter, YouTube and Reddit were collected.

Results

Despite the fact that three out of every four users believe there are too many ads on social media ([Surveymonkey](#), 2022), the sentiment analysis for FIFA World Cup ads were overwhelmingly positive at 82%. With nearly 2.79 billion potential impressions, big name sponsors were right to partner with the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup.

One of the most frequently discussed celebrities around the World Cup was BTS's Jungkook, who announced that he will perform at the FIFA World Cup's

opening ceremony. Fans flooded Twitter with praise and celebration of the young

pop star's many credentials and achievements as the UNICEF ambassador, the

youngest recipient of South Korea's Order of Cultural Merit, grammy nominee,

etc. This messaging largely overwhelmed other sponsorship messages with

trending hashtags such as #jungkook, #jungkookatfifaworldcup and keywords,

"youngest recipient," "special presidential envoy," etc. mentioned in over 130,000

posts.

Additionally, another k-pop group surfaced alongside McDonald's. ITZY, a

Korean girl band, appeared for approximately two seconds in McDonald's

"largest global campaign to date" alongside American comedian Jason Sudeikis

and TikTok's most followed influencer Khaby Lame (Adweek, 2022). Despite the

prominence of the American comedian and TikToker, ITZY showed a powerful

presence in the data.

Other prominently mentioned campaigns included Hyundai x BTS, Coca-Cola's campaign song for "Believing is Magic," Budweiser's position as the official beer, and a range of ads providing incentives for online gambling

Discussion

Despite concerns about human rights abuses in Qatar and public pressures for protest, this movement hasn't seemed to impact the positive sentiment towards corporate sponsors of the Cup nor celebrities associated with brand activations. For this particular Cup, social media revealed the power of BTS as a highly effective marketing tool. Hyundai and McDonald's enlisting K-pop stars in their campaign proved to be effective, as "BTS marketing" has set "a new paradigm in promotion" (Shah, 2021). Bringing global K-pop fan bases (BTS's official fan club alone has more than 40 million members) along a branded journey through celebrity endorsements presents tremendous opportunity for brands to tap into a dedicated market who will positively influence the bottom line. This research indicates that using celebrity stars – in particular BTS – may provide insulation from the public pressures against the Cup and FIFA, perhaps as these stars bring positive sentiment that overwhelms and perhaps obfuscates negative sentiments towards the Cup. In other words, as brands navigate the challenge of brand association with international sporting events, they should rely on celebrity partnerships for maximum brand potential.