

Report

Self-Other Perceptions: “Worlding” in the World Cup

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A merchant holds up a plastic copy of the FIFA World Cup at Souq Waqif during the FC Bayern Muenchen training camp on January 3, 2018 in Doha, Qatar. [Getty Images]

Introduction

The aim of this summary of a larger academic article is threefold: first, to survey perceptions of Qatar's winning the bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup, with special reference to English-language British newspaper The Guardian in the period 2013-2016. Second, the article critically assesses the discourse in these articles, highlighting dynamics of power relations. Third, in so doing, the article puts forth a post-colonial reading of British media discourses on Qatar. This is the first of several articles in progress showcasing preliminary findings of an ongoing student research project funded by the Qatar National Research Fund's Undergraduate Research Experience Program (UREP).

FIFA 2022: A "Host" of Perceptions

In 2010, Qatar was awarded the hosting rights to the 2022 World Cup by the Federation International de Football Association (FIFA). Ever since, the decision has been met by a harsh international media campaign criticizing the choice of Qatar, the first Arab and Muslim country to host the internationally prestigious sporting event. Allegations of corruption and bribery, and even references to the country's harsh climate during the summer months when the tournament is usually set to play, have been incessant. With the rights obtained by Qatar the state set a budget of \$100 billion in infrastructure upgrades and reform. This massive project has included the establishment of a new airport, hotels, and new stadiums to build up a capacity for the FIFA 2022 games. Keeping up with these fast-paced developments has been an intense scrutiny of Qatar as

the international media spotlight on the Gulf country has not waned. Such single-minded attention is exemplified by the British newspaper *The Guardian's* continuous coverage and editorializing on Qatar's FIFA prospects and preparations.

Through an examination of media discourses, this project aims to discern the variety of devices and tools for analogizing and generalizing Qatar, examining the resulting diversity of constructs of the country as future FIFA World Cup host. By identifying these perceptions, the study can compare and contrast contextual attitudes to explore the terrain of identity narratives--including and perhaps transcending "self/other" binaries--that condition and are informed by power relations. The research project compares and contrasts local and international perceptions of Qatar since its successful bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup.

Understanding Western, non-Western and Muslim perceptions of the same country – in the specific context of having become since 2011 the future host of a global event, the 2022 World Cup – is important to "East"- "West" relations, with implications for the international relations of the Middle Eastern and Gulf regions. The dynamics under investigation reflect processes of mutual inclusion and exclusion at the discursive level and a range of resulting perceptions, stereotyping, possible prejudice, and overall accord or discord in inter-state affairs.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a prime methodology for this study that seeks to examine dynamics of power and language in (Western) perceptions of a (non-Western) country in a specific context. This method is suitable for uncovering and understanding hidden meanings and interpreting perceptions in terms of both "how" and especially "why" questions (Julien 2008). This article thus employs QCA in a thorough, rigorous analysis of articles from the British newspaper *The Guardian* between 2013-2016, seeking to ascertain British perceptions of Qatar, as the Gulf country prepares to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Video 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oM0Je0MLVIO>

Postcolonialism and the Politics of Representation

Postcolonialism provides a useful analytic lens through which to examine the continuing impact of colonialism and imperialism on both (formerly) colonized and colonizing societies. This approach allows for an interpretation and critique of interactions between Western and non-Western states and societies across political, economic, and cultural realms. Attention to the nexus between language (and thus knowledge) and power is central here. Both historical and contemporary Self/Other representations construct the non-Western (colonized) "Other" as the foil to a European, Western (colonizing) Self. Orientalist discourse, as its most stringent critic Edward Said has charged, in effect

invented a backward, overly sensual, cruel and despotic “East” invariably inferior to a progressive, enlightened, and rational “West.” This creation of an East/West binary was crucial to justifying the military, economic, and cultural project that was 18th and 19th century European colonialism: representational practices have underpinned Western domination over the Orient.(1)

As postcolonial scholars suggest, the nominal political independence of post-World War II decolonization did not in fact usher in the liberation of “subaltern” people and societies. From the emergence of the nation-state to the present-day globalized world of international capitalism, global structural hierarchies persist. Critical interrogations of how the silenced subaltern is represented, and by whom, are thus key to postcolonial analysis.(2) Deconstructing hegemonic narratives that position subjects in (often intersecting) terms of race, gender, and class--between but also within Western and non-Western contexts--is thus a continuous endeavor for the postcolonial intellectual.(3) Sadiki connects post-colonialism to Orientalism, noting how postcolonial identity owes its existence to force and to colonial hegemonic management, both intellectual and military.(4) Yet Arab and Islamic counter-discourses renegotiating the relationship between Islam and democracy, for instance, indicate the postcolonial capacity for “speaking back” and “writing back” in an ongoing quest for good government.(5)

As future host of FIFA 2022, Qatar has been thrust into the international limelight in the Western-dominated domain of sporting events. Media coverage of Qatar’s FIFA 2022 gig is a prime “test” for the persistence of Self/Other perceptions consistent with neo-Orientalist discourses, and is thus the topic of study in this project.

“Guarding” the FIFA 2022 World Cup

One of the tools in the hands of the dominant power in the postcolonial era that transform the common conception of the world is the critical role of language in daily media. Language is thus essential in evoking patterns of meaning that reflect any given ideology. An evocation of meanings legitimizes the use of coercion and intimidation to avert resistance. It is also is used to threaten reassure people to be supportive or to remain quiescent. However, the use of language is not always ideological and manipulative. The fluid language-power dynamic can also facilitate the process of forming and practicing a new politics. Accordingly, struggles for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those resisting it, often center around language. The formation and execution of policies, whether by contest or consensus, is constituted and executed largely through language. As indicated above, postcolonial theory therefore offers a critique of imperial knowledge systems and languages. It examines how such knowledge systems are circulated and legitimated, how they serve imperial interests, and how they may be resisted. The creation of, maintenance of, and changes in power all occur in and through language.

In this article, we highlight the dynamic link between language and power through analyzing coverage of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Specifically, we seek to assess perceptions toward Qatar through analyzing the language used in newspaper articles under examination. Moreover, we investigate how media discourse reflects and bolsters hegemonic narratives within still-hierarchical global structures of power. Binary representations of a "Self" standing atop the moral high ground vis-à-vis the cruel, uncivilized "Other" remain in play. English-language media, this article further suggests, facilitates the maintenance of asymmetrical postcolonial power relations through published discourse that addresses both publics and policymakers. This "re-reading" of press discourse can thus be understood as a counter-narrative to the narrative disseminated by *The Guardian*. Noting that contests over concepts and practices of progress, development, justice, and equality still color encounters between "East" and "West," this article thus presents a fresh, contemporary application of postcolonial analysis.

A survey of *The Guardian's* coverage of Qatar's hosting of FIFA 2022 can be broken down into three broad substantive categories:

- a.) Worker human rights and conditions
- b.) Ethics and morality in the rights obtained by Qatar for 2022
- c.) Allegations of corruption and bribery



Doha's Al Thumama stadium, designed by a Qatari architect in the shape of a traditional knitted

“gahfiya” Arabian cap, will host 40,000 fans at a World Cup quarter final match, the country’s 2022 organising body said in a statement. [AFP]

The Guardian’s FIFA 2022 Coverage: A Postcolonial Reading

An article by Gibson the narrative reflects a colonial paradigm that appears to persist long after formal decolonization.(6) For example, Gibson emphasizes UEFA president Michel Platini’s comment naming politics and the economy as leading factors in the voting process choosing Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup. This remark is laden with hegemonic overtones, denying that Qatar presented a winning case deserving of hosting the FIFA World Cup. Instead, sports is explained not by sporting conventions but via politics and economics.

In another article, Mahmood, Lambie and Kelly pose a set of questions addressed to Qatari officials regarding the issue of workers human rights and conditions of Nepalese workers.(7) The questions themselves feature stereotyping and generalizing the image of slavery as a noteworthy issue. This piece presents a postcolonial European perspective seeming to limit liberty and liberalism within geographical boundaries that must not transcend the borders of the European continent inhabited by the civilized, urban white man. Outside those boundaries, the prevailing discourse (and thus perceptions) reference “slavery”, “racial discrimination”, and “violence”. The familiar binary of cultural progress and civilizational advancement versus backwardness is discernible here. There is a hidden discourse here: self-other oppositions of a finger pointing at a Muslim country guilty of exploitation and other transgressions presumably not found in the West.(8)

This set of perceptions is also evident in other articles. For example, a piece by Booth, Gibson and Pattisson elaborates the conditions of Nepalese workers and death tolls by estimating the deaths to reach 600 a year if the Doha government did not make urgent reforms in the workers conditions.(9) In another Guardian article Qatar is told by the world professional footballers’ association FIFA-Pro that it must respect the rights of the workers building the 2022 World Cup stadiums.(10) The article also focuses on how Qatar treats the workers, for example denying them access to free drinking water in extreme heat. It also raises the issue of unpaid salaries and confiscation of passports to prevent them from leaving the country. Moreover, there are reports of many workplace fatalities, including the death of 32 Nepalese workers in July alone. Here the language reflects a one-sided, free-reigning “commanding” posture. A self-styled morally superior (and more powerful) British “Self” thus imposes pressure on the Qatari “Other” to set in place a plan of reform.

Another article by Osborne and Gibson emphasizes how two Germans were arrested for filming the World Cup labor conditions.(11) They tried to interview some of the workers,

resulting in a chaotic scene, where they were prevented from conducting the interview. The article used phrases like “built on the blood of innocents” in order to magnify the issue of the workers’ condition in Qatar. The country’s progress in reforming the labor laws is described as “weak and disappointing,” with state response towards the allegation of workers poor condition considered inadequate. Here, Westerners appear to swoop in and “help” through publicized outcries over workers’ conditions in the country. Moreover, this article deepens a stereotypical binary. Working conditions in Qatar are due to the lack of the state’s awareness, implicitly contrasted with Western proactive institutions that foster a civil society with rules and regulations to uphold workers’ human rights and prosperity.

In yet another *Guardian* article, the author constructs a specific narrative where Qatar is illustrated as the worst of the worst in terms of human rights.⁽¹²⁾ This piece refers to Qatar as bad and unable to make things right; here colonial images are not only upheld but strengthened. The article cites workers’ complaints on how they were treated by Qatari employers. Quotations such as “in looking for life, we got so close to death,” preface demands addressed to Qatar’s government to re-work its labor law by integrating laborers as human being with essential rights. “We are not animals who can be imprisoned and suppressed in order to extract labor,” reads another quote in the article. In this discourse, where only one side “speaks” and the accused cannot represent itself. The article feeds into the broader narrative whereby the “West” can condemn and look down upon the Arab/Eastern “Other.”

The next leap is the subsequent claim to the right to decide what should be done and why the (Western) speaker is more suitable to make that decision. Here a dichotomy is invoked (again): bad, politically inept Qatar contrasted with the good, capable Western political instructor. Moreover, even its descriptions of Qatar’s evolution and progress in preparations for hosting the World Cup 2022 as somewhat remarkable and unusual. The article blames “slow” progress or an apparently objectionable state of affairs is blamed on what it terms an inadequate protection of human rights. Power asymmetries are expressed through binaries drawn along *moral* lines and distinctions.

Walker’s further dichotomizing article reports on England’s Culture Secretary’s statement insuring the UK’s desire and preparation to host 2022 as a European country if the hosting rights were taken from Qatar.⁽¹³⁾ It portrays Qataris as being unable to solve things without Western and international aid. If all else fails, England is on stand-by to step in and save the day! This position discredits the abilities of the Qataris or even regional powers. This “Other” is disadvantaged in media discourse verifying a Western willingness to play the rescuing role, ultimately upholding a modern colonial narrative.

Gibson and Black's article invokes the language of both international human rights and international labor rights standards.⁽¹⁴⁾ These international organizations seem to follow a common agenda: specifically, addressing the local problems of labor migrants in Qatar in the context of the World Cup preparations.

At the same time, numerous Qatari institutions have reacted to such criticism by promising to introduce a better welfare system and to implement other measures to protect migrant workers from abusive situations. However, the article stresses the (slow) pace of change as the government seeks to correct the condition of the workers. Moreover, the article criticizes Qatar for not having a set timetable for FIFA 2022 after more than four years of obtaining the rights to hosting the World Cup. Again, this article also criticizes the Kafala system, improvements to which limited the contract that ties the employer with the worker from indefinite to a 5-year contract. Consequently, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International consider this change to be a form of rebranding, not a reform of the system itself. Negative judgement representing Qatar is readily forthcoming; reforms are inadequate, surface-level, sluggish.

Gibson features Damian Collins'—British Conservative MP and FIFA reform advocate--statement on Qatar's World Cup 2022 issues.⁽¹⁵⁾ Qatar should reform the Kafala system that ties workers to their employers, members of the new FIFA group and the international Trade Union. According to Collins, FIFA and World Cup sponsors are partners in crime with Qatar, as the decision granting allowing Qatar to host the tournament results in worsening the conditions of workers. "If workers are dying, FIFA has blood on its hands," he proclaims. Moreover, the article reports on description of any endorsement to help Qatar host the world cup as cruel and a violation of human rights-. It again quotes Collins: "If McDonalds beef cattle lived in those conditions, you wouldn't buy their burgers."

Walker states in another article that human rights groups have criticized a UK trade minister for travelling to Qatar for getting construction deals without apparently highlighting the abuses faced by migrant workers building venues for the event.⁽¹⁶⁾ References are made disparaging Qatar's ethics and morality with respect to the human rights and the condition of workers as "rife with abuse." Here is yet another example of one-sided media coverage where the accused is not given a platform to "speak."

The following table summarizes provides a brief summary of the content analysis detailed above, with respect to the significance of specific language used in the media articles:

Language Used	Significance	Self-Other Binary
"In looking for the life, we	Poor working conditions	Enlightened/Uncivilized

got so close to death" (Pattisson, 2013, 17 Nov).		
"Rife with abuse" (Walker, 2016, 9 Nov).	Uncontained and widespread cruelty to workers	Humane/Inhumane
Qatar was an "open jail" Booth, R., Gibson, O. & Pattisson P. (2013, September 26).	Qatar as a place where laborers are trapped	Heaven/Hell Paradise/Inferno
"If workers are dying FIFA has blood on its hands" "If McDonalds beef cattle lived in those conditions, you wouldn't buy their burgers," (Gibson, 2015, 18 May).	Partners-in- crime with respect to working conditions Call to sanction to Qatar by stripping it from hosting rights for 2022 World Cup	Arbiter/ Sanctioned Judge/Criminal
"Built on the blood of innocents" (Osborne, Gibson, 2013, 14 Oct	Recklessly pursuing progress at the cost of human life	Civilized/Barbaric
"Are Stadiums built by Slaves" Squires, D. (2015, March 5).	Arabs are "stuck" in the antiquated practice of slavery	Virtuous/Unprincipled Advanced/Primitive
"Weak and disappointing" (Osborne, Gibson, 2013, 14 Oct	State action for reform is non-proactive and inadequate	Industrious/Lazy Capable/Inept
"dragging its feet on the modest reforms" Gibson, O. & Pattisson P. (2014, December 23). "the government of 'dragging its feet'" Gibson, O. & Black, I. (2015, May 14)	Arab/Muslim countries refuse to "catch up" with global processes of liberal reform, democratization, etc.	Progressive/Backward Modern/Perpetually Underdeveloped



[Getty Images]

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of the sample of articles collected from the British newspaper *The Guardian* with respect to Qatar's hosting of the FIFA 2022 World Cup suggests that postcolonial dynamics are alive and well. Self/Other binaries and Orientalist mirror images are upheld in discourse confirming a long-held narrative of the West as enlightened, civilized, and progressive caretakers of liberal values of tolerance, equality, and justice. These recurrent images are contrasted against the (in this case, Qatari) Easterner/Arab, timelessly and predictably cruel, incapable, morally primitive and always awaiting Western instruction and rescue. Media discourse, in other words, is colored by power dynamics, enabling the stubborn persistence of colonial hierarchies decades after decolonization. Notable in the analysis above is the manner in which even Qatari responses to international pressure—mediated through press discourse—are disparaged and deemed inadequate. Perceptions, read and interpreted here in media discourse, feed into new perceptions “reading” responses to policy criticisms framed in terms of the Self/Other binaries deconstructed above. Power and language, knowledge and power, media discourse and policy, are all interwoven in what appears to be an endless cycle that, when left unexamined, may in fact help uphold global power asymmetries.

Thus critical readings—here, postcolonial analysis—can offer counter-narratives in attempts to break down binaries, emphasize tolerance as opposed to “Othering,” and shorten rather than deepen distances between cultures and societies. Future work in this ongoing research project will a.) analyze perceptions in other international contexts; b.) compare local, regional, and global perspectives, through further analysis of press discourses; and c.) more fully situate press discourses in their various local and international political contexts to empirically verify, enrich, and contextualize the

preliminary findings discussed here. Sport is politicized: criticisms are not substantiated by sports arguments, but rather political and social explanations. In other words, the articles analyzed above do not argue the case against Qatar's hosting of the World Cup on the basis of sport. Left unmentioned and blatantly ignored—even for the sake of practical comparison—is that most countries which have hosted FIFA World Cup tournaments, including Australia, Brazil, and the USA, are not devoid of political problems, discrimination, and even human rights issues. A "worlding" of media discourses surrounding FIFA 2022 is a crucial step to uncovering and challenging what appear to be continually hegemonic narratives.

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