

Qatar and ‘The Lone Spectator’

The globalization of Qatari Football and the impact on local fan engagement

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact of the Qatari strategy to leverage the popularity of international football to increase local fan engagement. The existing fan base in Qatar is not large but very dedicated. A strong link between football clubs and tribal identities has resulted in a consistent presence of a smaller fan base in Qatari football. However, the attempt to increase fan engagement among a more significant segment of the population did create challenges. The established fan base has been outspoken about their concerns as they feel the competitiveness and the connection with their clubs weakening due to this effort. This thesis assessed the impact of the strategy to 'leverage the popularity of international football' to increase local fan engagement in Qatar. In addition to using existing literature on the topic, fieldwork was conducted in Qatar to gather data. The finding of the thesis is that the leveraging of the popularity of international football has not led to the results that were intended but rather stirred frustration and dissatisfaction amongst the existing Qatari fans.

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Notes on transliteration

All the transliterations applied in this thesis is in an accordance with the established guidelines provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)¹. Names of contributors used in accordance with how they transliterate their names.

All translations are my own.

¹ IJMES Translation and Transliteration guide. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journalof-middle-east-studies/information/author-resources/ijmes-translation-and-transliteration-guide>.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|------|---|
| AFC | Asian Football Confederation |
| FIFA | Fédération Internationale de Football Association |
| IAAF | International Amateur Athletic Federation |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| QFA | Qatar Football Association |
| QSL | Qatar Super League |
| UN | United Nations |

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1. Introduction

In 2010, FIFA declared Qatar as the host of the World Cup in 2022.² The tiny Gulf state, once considered an unlikely winner, is set to become the first host of the tournament in the Middle East. The announcement faced criticism and scepticism as human rights organizations raised concerns about corruption and irregularities in the bidding process.³ On top of that, the grim attendance in Qatari football and their absence in major international football tournaments did question how they could succeed with their bid.⁴

The Qatar authorities have since initiated a plan to increase the local Qatari fan engagement.⁵ The plan's objective is to involve the Qatari population and counter the notion of "state-invented" football culture. For that, many international football profiles have arrived in Qatar and joined different clubs in the league.⁶ For instance, Toby Alderweireld, Steven Nzonzi, Xavi Hernandez and James Rodriguez are well-known individuals in international football. The local interest in football would increase following their arrival was the strategy. However, creating a solid football culture is much more challenging and has been pivotal for Qatar amid international scrutiny. This is due to the scepticism towards Qatar hosting the tournament, as they have never qualified for it previously. Qatar has already secured a spot in the tournament as the host of the tournament.

The importance of local fan engagement for Qatar builds on two reasons. First, it does reflect positively on the society, especially when the population participates more in cultural activities. According to a survey conducted by Sue Bridgewater, the interest in football remains high in Qatar, but various challenges have hindered a larger turnout, among them traffic congestion.⁷ The second reason is how local fan engagement reflects on Qatar's international standing. It would strengthen the claim by commentators that Qatar might have 'bought' the world cup if there is little interest in football in the Gulf state.⁸ Hence, an increased local fan engagement could be the best way to counter this claim.

² Charlotte Lysa, "Globalized, yet local: football fandom in Qatar," *Soccer & Society*, (October 2020): 2.

³ Lysa, "Globalized," 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jorge Ovalle, "How much has Qatar invested to take its football to where it is?" *Latin American Post*, June 18, 2019.

⁶ Lysa, "Globalized," 3.

⁷ Sue Bridgewater, "Middle East and North Africa Football Fan Engagement," *Josoor Institute*, (Fall 2017) 1-27.

⁸ Matt Scott, "World Cup 2022: Qatar won the bid, but the real work starts," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2010.

Many believe that football became relevant in Qatar after the Gulf state succeeded with their bid for the tournament.⁹ The absence in major international football tournaments, the lack of top Qatari athletes in the major international football teams and the low attendance in Qatari football games was to some extent, the reality of Qatari football. However, despite the lack of competitiveness, the significant presence of football in Qatar since the 1950s is undisputable.¹⁰

This thesis will assess how the strategy to leverage international football to increase local fan engagement has worked out. The thesis aims to do so through the following research question.

‘How has the globalization of Qatari Football impacted local fan engagement?’ By this, I mean how the strategy to ‘leverage the popularity of international football’ has impacted local fan engagement in Qatar.

In this thesis, I study local fan engagement in Qatar in light of the upcoming FIFA World Cup in 2022. The tournament was awarded to Qatar in 2010. I will analyse the strategy to ‘leverage the popularity of international football’ to increase local fan engagement in Qatar. The arrival of international football players will be a significant attribute to this strategy. I will argue that the strategy to ‘leverage the popularity of international football has impacted local fan engagement and the overall turnout in the venues where Qatari football matches are played.

The first chapter will present the existing literature on the field of football in Qatar and the Middle East. On top of that, I will elaborate on the contributions that are influential in this thesis. The second chapter will assess the theoretical and methodological framework. How I will gather literature and conduct the research on this research question will be explained. The fieldwork will be presented in the third chapter, including data collection and reflections on the research process. The fourth chapter will provide context necessary to understand the complexity of the topic. Controversies surrounding the successful bid, treatment of migrants and the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf will be elaborated on in this chapter. The fifth chapter will proceed with the analysis and discussion of the research question, and the data gathered to discuss the findings. At last, the conclusion will summarise and conclude on the most important findings and the answer to the research question.

⁹ Lysa, “Globalized,” 3

¹⁰ “Football History,” Home, Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, Accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.qatar2022.qa/en/qatar/historic-bid-journey/football-history>

2. Literature review

The literature on football in Qatar and football in The Middle East is steadily increasing. The region has a substantial amount of people interested in football.¹¹ Therefore, this literature review on the topic provides diverse perspectives and important insights. The issues raised are recurring topics during my research project, and therefore they have provided important context for the research question at hand.

The literature below might not have constituted a crucial contributor to this thesis. Still, it has constituted a part of the overall information gathering that has been done over the duration of this research process. Therefore, the literature below provides insights into the topic relevant to this thesis. Each of them has been assessed, and their relevance to this research has been addressed.

i. Football Fan Engagement in Qatar – quantitative approach

In 2017, Sue Bridgewater published a study titled ‘Middle East and North Africa Football Fan Engagement’.¹² The study looked at the attitudes and behaviours of football fans across ten Middle Eastern countries with a particular focus on the interest in major international leagues compared to domestic leagues.¹³ The findings indicated a substantial interest for football in the population, with a higher interest for international football compared to local football. The results however also illustrated that an overwhelming majority refuse to purchase tickets to attend football matches.¹⁴

In the quantitative survey, the results clearly indicated most participants taking interest in football.¹⁵ The results also stated that many watch football matches from home, which may indicate that low attendance in stadiums does not reflect on the overall interest for football. The survey proved important for those that wanted to debunk claims that football was not at all of interest in Qatar. This contribution does bring important perspectives to the research project. The interest in football could be high, despite empty venues if people watched games

¹¹ Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 16

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 18.

¹⁴ Ibid, 19.

¹⁵ Ibid, 16.

at home.¹⁶ On the other side, the contribution does not answer to the immensely empty stadiums, as fan engagement reflects through attendance in venues.

Professor Bridgewater introduces different definitions for important concepts when examining fan engagement.¹⁷ She takes into consideration the global perspective of sports, the history with FIFA as the head organization and the role it plays both domestically in countries and on the international stage. In this sense, she defines “The Global and Local Game of Football”.¹⁸ There is little doubt that this perspective is very important for Qatar. It is given to a certain level that there is an interest for international football, but not certain whether that interest also goes for domestic football.

Providing the structure of international football with the continental associations all the way down to the national associations also provides the tools to understand the mechanisms that influence the fan engagement in the Middle East. Finalizing the assessment with the motivations that are involved in fan engagement gives a good perspective on the issue I plan to research. The final sections with the surveys are crucial as well as they shed light on views of Qatari fans in relations to fan engagement.

ii. Women’s sports in Saudi Arabia and Qatar – qualitative approach

A relevant contribution that directly worked with football in Qatar is from Charlotte Lysa.¹⁹ Her dissertation for the Degree of PhD embarks on several topics related to women’s sports in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Several chapters from this dissertation concerns Qatar, football in Qatar and domestic fan engagement. Experiences concerning methodology and theory will be of importance. Perspectives on “football culture” is also raised, which also contributes to the research I have conducted.²⁰

Lysa carries out extensive fieldwork to work with women’s football in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The research question here embarks on a restricted area, which demands people-to-people relations to carry out research. On top of that, she brings along two main theoretical discussions for her work. The first builds on the relations between gender, sports, politics, and society. The second focus is on scholarship in football in the Middle East region in general, as

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lysa, «Yalla Banat,» (Phd. Diss., University of Oslo, 2019), 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 109.

many of the countries in the region share common norms and belief systems. This framework alongside the fieldwork brings the perspectives and results of this research project.²¹

The contribution however does not embark extensively on the issue relating to the role of the state in terms of influencing people to engage more with football. The empty stadiums are also portrayed as a statement on the low interest for football in Qatar. It is important to assess the underlying reasons for empty stadiums in Qatar. In particular, as Bridgewater illustrates the overall high interest for football in Qatar.²²

iii. Politics and Sports – can they be separated?

The contribution of Dag Tuastad examines the fan engagement in the Middle East in relation to politics.²³ The role it plays as an arena to express political views in opposition to the ruling government. In that sense, the apparent link between politics of sports become prevalent, and is an important perspective to take into consideration. For Qatar, this became apparent when celebrations erupted in Doha when Qatar defeated the neighbouring United Arab Emirates in the semi-final of the Asian Cup. At that time, the neighbours were at odds following the abrupt blockade imposed on Qatar by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen and The United Arab Emirates.²⁴ In that sense, the victory had a political value attached to it, and drew out enthusiasm in the population.²⁵

For the case presented by Dag Tuastad, ultras supporters in the Egyptian revolution and the political role of nationalist supporters in Jordan in challenging political taboos stood out as cases where supporters represent something bigger than previously imagined.²⁶ However, the cases of Jordan and Egypt portray countries with larger populations and more engaged football supporters compared to what we can see in Qatar. Therefore, the limits of this literature are of how the cases mentioned can be relevant in Qatar.²⁷

²¹ Lysa, "Yalla Banat," 9.

²² Bridgewater, "Middle East," 2017.

²³ Dag Tuastad, "From football riot to revolution. The political role of football in the Arab world," *Soccer & Society* no.3 (February 2013): 376-388.

²⁴ Patrick Wintour, "Qatar given 10 days to meet 13 sweeping demands by Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2017.

²⁵ The New Arab, "Qatar erupts in celebration after defeating rival UAE on the football field," *The New Arab*, March 15, 2019.

²⁶ Tuastad, "From Football," 379.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 381.

Tuastad does point to the fact that spectator cultures in the Middle East is heavily politicized. This is explained based on a variety of reasons, among them the popularity of football subject to exploitation from the regimes in the region. This point can apply to Qatar as they undertake a wide range of events in sports and rally their population to part-take in the tournaments.²⁸

iv. Beliefs System and Sports – impact on Fan Engagement

A different approach to apply when assessing fan engagement is the relations this has with the faith of the people. Qatar is a Muslim majority country with laws stipulated on the Sharī'a.²⁹ The advisory Shura board remain influential in forwarding the religious perspectives as the society prepares for the tournament and fan engagement remains important for Qatar. Therefore, the contribution from Omar Sami Hameed and Sanaa Issa Mohammed Al-Daghistani will be of great interest.³⁰ They are based in the University of Baghdad and completed a study called “*nasq al-mu'taqidāti wa 'alāqatahu bi-l-taṣa'ub al-riyāḍī lada mushajj'i kurat al-qadam*”. The authors implement a definition of “belief system” based on Rokeach view of belief system as an organization formed from living in nature and in society.³¹ The scale on sports prejudice was based on theory and previous standards for such research according to the contributors.³² The contribution was published in *Al Adāb Journal* in the University of Baghdad.

This contribution highlights how the strict understanding of belief system can lead to prejudice among soccer fans, and how this balance is particularly challenged as areas of politics and sports often overlap.³³ This complicated issue also applies to Qatar as the country navigates the globalization of Qatari football with the established strict social practises in the

²⁸ Ibid, 386.

²⁹ Sharī'a, the fundamental religious concept of Islam—namely, its law.

The religious law of Islam is seen as the expression of God's command for Muslims and, in application, constitutes a system of duties that are incumbent upon all Muslims by virtue of their religious belief. Known as the Sharī'a (literally, “the path leading to the watering place”), the law represents a divinely ordained path of conduct that guides Muslims toward a practical expression of religious conviction in this world and the goal of divine favour in the world to come. **Source:** Calder, N. and M.B. Hooker, “Sharī'a”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 14 May 2022 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1040
First published online: 2012. First print edition: ISBN: 9789004161214, 1960-2007

³⁰ O. Sami Hameed & S. Al-Daghistani, “nasq al-mu'taqidāti wa 'alāqatahu bi-l-taṣa'ub al-riyāḍī lada mushajj'i kurat al-qadam,” *Al Adāb Journal*, (December 2020): 263-286.

³¹ Ibid, 263.

³² Ibid, 286.

³³ Sami and Al-Daghistani, “Beliefs System,” 269.

society. The Shura board have expressed scepticism towards parts of the labour reform initiated in Qatar following massive international pressure on labour rights.³⁴

At the same time, the contribution does not bring points that could directly influence the attendance in football games, or the interest amongst the people. It does not apply to Qatar directly as well, which raises similar issues as of the contribution from Tuastad in terms of not applying to the case of Qatar. However, it does highlight the conflict of interest that might occur when belief system highly influencing a society is challenging sports and fan engagement.

The different themes affecting one another is what all these contributions have in common. Lysa raises the perspective on how football works for women in Qatar with a particular focus on gender and society. Tuastad involves more how football can become an arena for fans to express political views that may be considered critical to the authorities. At last, the belief system in a Qatari context is essential, and the interplay of faith and football remains a relevant dimension.

³⁴ Lysa, "Globalized," 4.

3. Theoretical and methodological framework

Important theories when assessing fan engagement have been various. There is no ambition in this thesis to define whether Qatar is a “football nation”, but instead embark on what the domestic interest for football is in light of the various efforts to engage more with global football.

As for the “state-invented” perspective raised by Dag Tuastad³⁵, the research will take on a case-study form of approach to enhance the knowledge of Qatar. To determine the validity of the research question, a qualitative approach is more suitable. A qualitative study contributes to a wider data collection while at the same time keeping an in-depth focus on the data. It includes the many perspectives that fall out when comprehensive quantitative surveys are carried out on this topic.

The survey on fan engagement did produce information suggesting a substantial interest in football in Qatar, both international and domestic football.³⁶ However, this does not sit well with the empty stadiums in Doha during football games. On top of that, the opposite perspective is conceived when migrants are paid to watch games.³⁷ Amna Nasrallah wrote in a Qatari newspaper about a survey on low attendance in Qatari matches. Her contribution provides important information as she sheds light on the reasons why attendance is low in Qatar and elaborates on those issues.³⁸ Therefore, to get a more in-depth understanding of how the driving force for football is led by the state and how it is affecting the fan engagement is crucial to this thesis. The approach of Lysa in her research on women’s football was also a qualitative approach.³⁹ An enhanced fieldwork that engages with civil society could be the most viable approach to working out the research question.

In this thesis, the attendance in football matches will define the level of football fan engagement in Qatar. Fan engagement is about the relationship between fans and clubs, and how fans engage with their clubs on a regular basis. This will be measured through the attendance in the football matches in the Qatari league. There are other definitions of fan

³⁵ Dag Tuastad, “The Politics and Passion of Middle Eastern Football Spectator Cultures,” in *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East*, ed. Danyel Reiche, Paul Michael Brannagan (London: Routledge, 2022): 212-213.

³⁶ Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 2017.

³⁷ Lysa, «Yalla Banat,» 9.

³⁸ Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 2017.

³⁹ Amna Nasrallah, “Why People Do Not Attend Football Matches in Qatar,” *Qatar Sports Tanmiya*, February 11, 2015.

engagement that measures the engagement both online and offline. However, in this thesis, I am convinced that the attendance does illustrate the situation for Qatari football in terms of fan engagement. The surveys that confirm the high interest for football, the high turnout for the national team and the low turnout for the domestic league demonstrates the apparent disparity in fan engagement. Therefore, the outcome of the strategy to leverage the popularity of international football to increase local fan engagement will be measured through the attendance at the football games.

In other countries, when football teams perform well, the increased fan engagement becomes apparent through the increased attendance in football games.⁴⁰ The effect is the same when the football teams fail to perform well, it affects the attendance in a negative way.⁴¹

3.1 Methodology

i. Qualitative observation – fieldwork

Participant Observation (PO) was the method for gathering data during the fieldwork for this thesis. It was essential to travel to Qatar and be present on the ground to get a better perspective on the situation for Qatari Football. To be limited to existing literature would not be sufficient. Therefore, during the autumn of 2021, I conducted a PO fieldwork in Qatar. It is important to discuss the literature on this research method, the flaws and strengths and how it suited this research.

Herbert J.Gans explains the value of Participant Observation as a research method.⁴² It could contribute to a more in-depth understanding of an issue. More elaborating, explaining and perhaps even debunking the quick headlines that often dominate the news agencies in The United States, according to Gans.⁴³ This method could also provide empirical findings about populations that previously have been met with stereotypes and in particular those outside the mainstream.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Marcelo Silveira, Marcos Cardoso and Filipe Quevedo-Silva, "Factors influencing attendance at stadiums and arenas," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, (September 2020): 37. 10.1108/MIP-02-2018-0048.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² H.J. Gans, "Participant Observation in the Era of Ethnography," SAGE Publications, (January 2011): 1, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/089124199129023532>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

“In the field: notes on observation in qualitative research” is a chapter that Anne Mulhall wrote as a part of a larger contribution on methodological issues.⁴⁵ In particular, the distinction between structured observation and unstructured observation was relevant for this thesis.⁴⁶ Despite her contribution being related to the topic of nursing research, she does state that “unstructured observation is a key method in anthropological and sociological research.”⁴⁷

Unstructured observation means that the PO is not based on following a strict list of predetermined criteria, but instead enters the field with no predetermined notions. Mulhall herself states that the label “unstructured observation” is misleading, as the need to distinguish it from structured observation has led to a label not reflecting the meaning so well.⁴⁸

Mulhall explains an important difference between the structured and unstructured observation. The unstructured PO will often switch between the roles between complete participant and complete observer.⁴⁹ “‘Structured observers’ are attempting to remain objective and not contaminate the data with their own preconceptions,” Mulhall states. This is in fact a significant point to address as this fieldwork involved attending football games. In Qatar, when attending football games, it could happen several times that other fans or spectators would initiate conversations and offer perspectives on the very topic that was being researched. To separate the researcher from the ‘researched’ was in these situations impossible.

The importance of observation is also highlighted by Mulhall.⁵⁰ Observing how particular social settings are constructed can provide important details that could be valuable for the research. The benefits of using “our eyes and ears” is to get a better grasp of the whole picture, the context and insight into interactions and the physical environment.⁵¹ The research on local fan engagement needs those insights as well. For instance, a common issue for the different stadiums I visited was the distance between the venues and the metro stations. The metro that already struggles to attract Qatari commuters, have not been able to transport

⁴⁵ Anne Mulhall, “In the field: notes on observation in qualitative research,” *Methodological Issues in Nursing Research*, (October 2002): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02514.x>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 307.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Qatari fans to and from football games.⁵² Instead, Qataris use their cars despite severe traffic to watch the games.⁵³ This is in stark opposition to football in European countries in which the public transportation is vital for the safe transport of a large amount of fans to and from the venues. In Qatar however, it is important to point out that the attendance in games is very low, despite the impression of a large turnout based on the congestion. This will be a larger challenge, if more people are to attend local games in the future. This was an interesting observation that would not have been noted in the research if the data was solely based on existing literature.

On a different note, there are issues that relate to this research method. Mulhall points out the role of the researcher and the challenges surrounding informed consent versus deception.⁵⁴ The core of the issue is if the 'researched' are fully informed or not. The role of the researcher is essential to address the challenges. For the 'complete observer', the focus will be to maintain the distance and for its role to be concealed and avoid interaction.⁵⁵ The 'complete participant' will be a part of the social situation, but his role will remain concealed in resemblance to the 'complete observer'. If the observer also is a participant, his role will be known while undertaking the observation.⁵⁶ An observer can also be involved in all the central activities, and his role will also be known. Each of these approaches bring with them different opportunities and challenges.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is essential that the researcher addresses these issues prior to moving ahead with a certain role.

In this fieldwork, the role as 'complete participant' was undertaken, when attending the football games in Qatar. The ambition was to obtain the full match-day experience, sit amongst the crowd and do the observation. Conversations with fans occurred, and it contributed to the overall observation. As there were no specific participants in the observatory fieldwork, I decided to not inform the attendees that I was carrying out a fieldwork in effect of my presence. I also did not inform the fans that approached me to initiate an informal conversation about the game, as none of them were interviewed, their identities were unknown and their comments were not essential for the fieldwork. It is important to recognize that people have the right to privacy, and that the researcher has no

⁵² Nasrallah, "Why People."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mulhall, "In the field:" 306.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 308.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

privilege over the 'researched'. However, this does not constitute 'a covert observation' that would trigger solid grounds for not informing participants, as this in fact was an observatory fieldwork with no certain individuals under observation, but rather a crowd in a public space. Despite that fact, these issues were under consideration for the entirety of the fieldwork, as it is important to reflect on them properly and make legitimate decisions.

ii. Secondary literature

The contribution from Charlotte Lysa with the title “Globalized, yet local: football fandom in Qatar” constitutes a pivotal contributor to this research project.⁵⁸ The contribution and this research project share many similarities.⁵⁹ Looking beyond the political situation for Qatar and the region, the local approach is both valuable and relevant for this research project.⁶⁰ This is in contrast to the large focus on politics in most of the research conducted on Football in Qatar. The social context and tribal identities provide essential information not only on how it reflects on Qatari football but also how it engages with the commercialization and politicization of Qatari football.⁶¹ The commercialization is the heavily increased investments in international football profiles and the politicization is the correlation this has with the state efforts to increase fan engagement in Qatar. Tribal identities is the strong bond between the tribes that Qataris belong to, and its direct relation to the football clubs. This leads to a strong sense of loyalty to the teams as it runs through generations to support the team of your respective tribe. Hence, the success of your team becomes essential, and if the presence of international football players either fails to improve your team, or weaken your position towards other teams, it can easily spark conflict within the fan base in different clubs.⁶² Hence, the globalization of Qatari football can be perceived as moving against the interests of many Qatari football fans.⁶³

The literature includes interviews with locals that offer their views on the situation for Qatari football. There are numerous of other contributions that will fill the gaps throughout the thesis and in total, offer a comprehensive analysis of the research question. However, the

⁵⁸ Lysa, “Globalized,” 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

contribution from Lysa does offer distinct perspectives on the research question, and the conclusions that came with that contribution will influence the discussion in this thesis.

Dag Tuastad wrote about ‘the invention of Spectator Culture’ in a contribution on spectator culture in Qatar.⁶⁴ The issue for Qatar was the many vacant seats in the stadiums giving the impression that the interest in football in Qatar was low.⁶⁵ The impression did not get better as a majority in a survey claimed that they disliked the presence of ‘paid attendees’.⁶⁶ Tuastad’s contribution is very relevant because the state effort to increase fan engagement is practically what drives the globalization of football in Qatar.⁶⁷ The friction over the ‘paid attendees’ was a symptom for the disapproval amongst Qatari fans towards the state efforts.⁶⁸ At the same time, for the world to see a single attendee in a league fixture in a stadium with the capacity of 27,000 was very unfortunate for Qatar.⁶⁹ It was not an option to allow the ‘lone spectator match’ to set the narrative of fan engagement in Qatar for the world. Therefore, Tuastad does illustrate the state efforts to increase fan engagement, and the local opposition to these efforts.⁷⁰

The study conducted by Sue Bridgewater will provide statistics on the interest for football in Qatar, and the comparative analysis of the interest for international football compared to local football.⁷¹ The motivations behind the interest for local football will also be relevant as it relates to the correlation between identity and fan engagement in similarity to what Lysa states.⁷²

3.2 Limitations

The thesis was undertaken during difficult circumstances. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Qatar had enforced strict entry requirements, which barred me from entering the state up until late in September. This delayed my departure substantially, and therefore the fieldwork was shorter than initially planned. By arrival in Qatar, the time was limited and the tasks ahead were plenty. The restrictions in the Qatari society also proved challenging to engage with the civil society. Therefore, this thesis was undertaken during circumstances that are not

⁶⁴ Tuastad, “The Politics,” 212.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ France 24, “Migrant workers in Qatar: We’re paid to attend football games,” *France 24*, March 14, 2014, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20140314-migrant-workers-paid-qatar-football>.

⁶⁷ Tuastad, “The Politics,” 212.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 213.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 212.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 213.

⁷¹ Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 2017.

⁷² Lysa, “Globalized,” 5.

preferable to a qualitative research project. The plan was to conduct extensive interviews with Qatari fans, but this plan was abandoned following the heavy restrictions on mobility and the heavy delay on the departure. It could have been valuable for this thesis to conduct such interviews, but the alternative approach, which was to conduct an observatory fieldwork, was also of high value to the research project.

4. Fieldwork in Qatar

4.1 Introduction to the fieldwork⁷³

I decided to combine existing literature and fieldwork interviews to constitute the empirical foundation for this research project.

For the fieldwork it was important for me to undertake it in a manner that was built on transparency and verifiability. Therefore, it was important for me to keep records of all games I attended and ensure that all statistics and relevant information was available online on official pages. This is an important recommendation from Robert Vitalis "The Past is Another Country".⁷⁴

My aim was to engage more strongly with the opinions of the supporters that is of substantial importance. In the process of collecting data, I soon recognized that there were conducted quantitative surveys on football fan engagement in Qatar, but such approaches fall short to address the questions raised in this research project. The study conducted by Josoor Institute and Deloitte did portray a substantial interest for football, but cannot explain the gap in interest that is apparent between domestic football and international football. It also lacks the in-depth perspectives that can shed light on how this gap is conceived by football fans or the situation in a specific Middle Eastern country such as Qatar.

However, the article later published based on the study did provide specific recommendations for how to increase local fan engagement. Two of the recommendations addressed the importance of an improved match day experience and engaging with fans outside the stadiums.⁷⁵ Therefore, I decided to both attend several games to gain experience from the games themselves, but also pay attention to the social setting as well. The focus was to obtain as much insight into Qatari football and culture as possible. Throughout my data collection process, I became more comfortable with my decision.

I reflected on the fact that football in Qatar has been a tense issue due to the treatment of migrant workers. The media coverage has been vocal and critical towards Qatar and the political leadership in the country. Therefore, I was prepared for an atmosphere in which Qataris would be sceptical towards a project that would critically assess their football fan

⁷³ This chapter includes notes from the fieldwork conducted in Qatar. The notes remain a part of the portfolio submitted in MES4020 in the Autumn Semester of 2021. Information retrieved from this submission is presented throughout this chapter.

⁷⁴ Robert Vitalis, "Archives: The Past is Another Country1," *SAGE Publications* (January 2011): 2, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412983211>.

⁷⁵ Simon Cory-Wright, "A Middle East Point of View," *Deloitte*, Fall 2017.

engagement. In particular, as the researcher is from a foreign country. However, after the fieldwork I did not face such an experience.

I also noted that much of the literature on Qatar relating to football is directly linked to the upcoming world cup and the reforms initiated by the government to improve workers conditions. The available literature that is specifically assessing the Qatari society was limited, and that explains my reason for approaching the academia in Qatar to receive their perspectives on how to proceed with this research. I received from Ibn Khaldon Center in Qatar University a magazine in which they had a contribution with the World Cup as a model for projecting soft power as topic.⁷⁶

The contribution focused on the perceptions of Qataris towards the government using culture as a soft power in the context of hosting the world cup. The study involved interviews of 111 residents, professionals among others. The contribution was in English, and was issued in May 2021. It did not relate to the research topic I was working on in Qatar.

I decided to watch three football games to observe the matchday experience, fan engagement and talk to supporters about their ideas on the local football fan engagement. The observatory fieldwork would place my role as 'a complete participant' without disclosing my research project. The 'researched' would constitute the venues, attendees, and the events as they occurred. The working language would be in English, while Arabic constituted the norm in many of the conversations that unfolded. Speaking advanced Arabic in an independent, clear and detailed manner, it was valuable in a country with Arabic as the official language. The Qatari attendees managed to speak English well, and therefore switching over to English was easy when necessary.

4.2 Social setting – the matchday experience

The structure for the football games were different compared to European football. The league matches occurred on 'neutral venues' as two games convened on the same day. The first game could convene at 17:30 local time, while the following fixture would begin at 19:45, approximately two hours and fifteen minutes later. This gave the impression initially

⁷⁶ Researchers from Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities & Social Sciences, "Culture a Tool for Projecting Soft Power: Hosting FIFA World Cup as a Model," *Qatar University Research Magazine*, May 15, 2021, 49, http://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/magazine/english_15_may_2021.pdf.

that the attendance would not be extensive, and that ground staff could handle fans belonging to four different teams in a few hours. The first fixture I attended after arrival in Doha was the evening game between Al Araby and Al Sadd. As I arrived half an hour prior to kick-off, the earlier match finished moments before, but most fans had already left when I came.

Also, the stadiums were all located at a distance from the nearest public transportation. Therefore, the walking distance made it more convenient to take a taxi to the venue. After arriving at the stadium, I learned that most of the stands were closed and that a specific section would be open to fans from both teams, and also neutral fans supporting neither sides. Most attendees arrived by car, and the venues had in common that large spaces of parking spots were available.

The attendees were families with children, friends that came together and an overwhelming majority of Qatari nationals. It was in fact one of the very few public places in which I saw Qataris constitute the majority of those present. Most of the attendees came in the traditional Qatari *Thawb*⁷⁷, but brought with them scarves. Wearing the team jersey was unusual with the exception of the of the paid attendees playing drums and chanting in support of their teams.

4.3 Proceeding with the data collection

The first game was between Al Araby and Al Sadd at the Khalifa International Stadium. The teams were at the time at the top of the table, and this was the opportunity for Al Araby to surpass Al Sadd on the league table. The attendance was significant compared to the other matches I observed later in the stay. It is relevant to mention that both Al Araby and Al Sadd carry long traditions and are among the oldest clubs in the country. In the match Al Araby did hold up the pace with Al Sadd and created significant chances but came too short at the end with Al Sadd crushing their opponents 4-0. I sat with the Al Araby fans and could sense a slight optimism which culminated in the disappointment of losing the game. One supporter said that “it would be a sensation if we won this game anyway” as Al Sadd doubled their lead.

The frustration at the end was equally present both on the pitch and in the stands. Al Sadd fans would however celebrate another impressive win against one of their biggest

⁷⁷ A thawb or thobe (Arabic: ثَوْب / ALA-LC: thawb), also called kandoora or dishdasha, is an ankle-length garment, usually with long sleeves, similar to a robe, kaftan or tunic. It is commonly worn in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, neighbouring Arab countries, the southern parts and Islands of Iran, and some countries in East and West Africa. A sirwal or pants, izaar or lungi are typically worn underneath. “Thawb,” Definitions for thawb, Definitions, accessed May 26, 2022. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/thobe>.

competitors. Later in the stay, I returned to observe the game between Al Rayyan and Al Gharafa in the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium. The third game was between Al Khor and Al Araby.

The matchday experience was similar for all the games I attended. Due to the limited number of fans watching the games, one stadium is used as a venue for two games occurring on the same day. Out of the four teams playing on that day, the venue might be the home stadium for one of the teams. However, it stands out as a neutral arena, and the allocated seats are equal for both sides. While there was plenty of parking opportunities, and a family-friendly atmosphere, there was little to see to what the report advised in terms of improving the matchday experience.

Wright writes the following about matchday experience as one of the recommendations to improve fan engagement:⁷⁸

“A clear outtake from the study was that the typical match day experience in the Middle East presents many barriers to attendance. The quality of stadia and infrastructure was a major factor and is something already being addressed in several countries. Other key issues discouraging attendance included match atmosphere, quality of services such as parking and catering, and suitability for families. Local leagues must focus on improving these basic match day elements to establish a solid foundation on which to build the wider fan experience.

Once the fundamentals are properly dealt with then, and only then, should Middle East clubs and leagues consider pursuing the kind of immersive, Smart Stadia experience being created at the world’s leading sports and entertainment stadia. Technology-led features such as food and beverage ordering from your seat via smartphone apps, augmented reality wayfinding and ticket entry using near-field communication are developing rapidly in the world’s leading sports venues. But while these represent the cutting edge of sports stadia technology, for now the Middle East should consider these as extra frills and focus on the basics: providing convenient parking, efficient entry and exit, together with affordable, quality food and beverage, to name just a few.”

However, attendees did not mention this to me as an issue that hinders increased fan engagement. The initial recommendations such as parking, quality of infrastructure and suitability for families were all implemented. It seemed like these services were essential to those that actually attended the games. At the same time, the rather bleak catering services were not discouraging to those present, but an improvement could attract more attendees.

⁷⁸ Cory-Wright, “A Middle East.”

4.4 Reflection on the research process

The fieldwork and my duration of stay in Qatar has been highly valuable to the research project, and to the data collection. Such a topic with little literature available at this stage was the starting point that I was prepared for prior to departure for Doha.

Also, attending football games was very important as I got in touch with football fans in Qatar and under those circumstances the informal conversations we had proved valuable. I attended three different football games in total. In these matches, I encountered supporters from three different teams, and the presence of fans from five different teams in three different venues. I observed the distinct culture that each team has, but also what there is in common. The longstanding history of Al Sadd, and their dominance in the domestic league for the past years. The strong financial teams with large investments such as Al Lusail, or the frustration amongst Al Rayyan fans with their French manager.

It was challenging to engage with the civil society and the football organizations in Qatar. Heavy restrictions on mobility in Qatar prevented me from engaging more actively in the football environments. On top of that, the society is segregated in where foreign workers live separate lives from the Qatari citizens. Therefore, most of my contacts and the network consisted of people that had lived in Qatar but with a foreign background. I do acknowledge that restrictions due to the pandemic still affected the society in Qatar when I was there.

During my stay in Qatar, I reached out to different universities and institutes to gather literature they held on the topic. I received a contribution that was a part of a magazine issued by Qatar University. The magazine and the contribution were in English, and the authors did not issue the magazine in Arabic. I was surprised by the absence of literature on these issues that was produced in Arabic, and admit that I was rather expecting various literature also in Arabic. Therefore, I did attempt to obtain literature on the issue in Arabic by myself.

However, I did appreciate the meetings with Dr Eltigani Rahma and Ms Afrah Farhan Al-Otaibi in the Ibn Khaldoun Center, a research centre that embarks on humanities and social sciences, and also football in Qatar. Albeit not leading to concrete literature or contributions to this thesis, I valued conversations with them on research method and positionality of ‘researcher’ in the field. They agreed on the suitability and legitimacy of choosing a role as “complete participant’ and not disclosing the research project during talks with fans in the venues.

The pandemic did have an impact on the society in Qatar, and I took that into consideration. At the end, I concluded the fieldwork with increased knowledge, more data and a better overview and a variety of perspectives that would further my research project.

5. Context – Football in Qatar

5.1 History of Football in Qatar

Qatar has been a member of the international Football body FIFA for 58 years but came into the spotlight in International Football when awarded the tournament in 2010.⁷⁹ To understand the interest in football in Qatar, it is essential to assess the situation before 2010. Football in Qatar traces back several decades, with oil workers in 1948 organizing games between themselves.⁸⁰ Two years later, the first Qatari teams registered, with the Qatari Football Association established a decade later.⁸¹ As local clubs organized themselves in domestic tournaments, Qatar hosted famous players such as Pele in organized sporting events in Doha. In 1970, QFA joined FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation.⁸²

Qatar established a national football team later in the 70s, with some notable performances in international tournaments. However, they never qualified for the World Cup and did not outperform in the sports among its regional neighbours or in the AFC tournament.⁸³ However, the Qatari League, established in 1973, is still present as it soon celebrates 50 years of functioning.⁸⁴

The period following 2010 stands out as a new era for Football in Qatar. Heavy investments into domestic football in order to drive up the local engagement and build a strong national team have been the strategy for Qatar.⁸⁵ The tournament is expected to be held in the last months of 2022, with Qatar having the very first opportunity to participate in a World Cup. Compared to previous hosts of the World Cup, Qatar has received little coverage in terms of its records in Football. However, that might be that hosts like Brazil in 2014 or Germany in 2006 are one of the most robust and most consistent participants in the tournament and have won the game previously. South Africa, however, which is more comparable to Qatar in terms of ranking among national teams, did receive coverage on the domestic interest around

⁷⁹ "Football History," Home, Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, Accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.qatar2022.qa/en/qatar/historic-bid-journey/football-history>

⁸⁰ Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, "Football."

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Jorge Ovalle, "How much has Qatar invested to take its football to where it is?" *Latin American Post*, June 18, 2019.

football and sports as they hosted the tournament in 2010. Examples rank between the study by Peter Alegi⁸⁶ and Mogajane.⁸⁷

Qatar has struggled with low attendance in sports events previously, which has sparked a debate if large sports events at all can draw domestic interest.⁸⁸ The Gulf state hosted the IAAF World Athletics Championships in Doha, among other competitions and tournaments. In this tournament, the stadium was also relatively empty compared to previous hosts of the same tournament.⁸⁹ It could be explained by Qatar not being a solid participant in the games, only claiming two medals.

A survey completed in Qatar asked why people did not show up in football games.⁹⁰ The results indicated a wide range of reasons that held most of the participants from attending games. Personal reasons, organizational causes, service causes and hot climate were all leading reasons for the low turnout in stadiums.⁹¹ On top of that, paid attendees also discouraged people from showing up at the games, with no further explanations.⁹² This illustrates a wide range of reasons that hold back the sheer enthusiasm for the sport in Qatar. It could also signal a lack of interest in football, which sets a low standard for what makes people stay at home instead of attending games. In Europe, the passion is strong enough to bring fans to travel long distances to support their team. It also raises whether the interest is state-invented if the government plans to increase the turnout and incentivize this in different ways.

Globalization of Qatari football is a way of explaining the direction authorities have chosen for the local football. Increased engagement with international football players in order to attract a higher turnout in events and increase the overall interest for football. Simon Cory-Wright with Deloitte describes the same process as ‘Leverage the popularity of international

⁸⁶ Peter Alegi, “South Africa and the global game: Introduction,” *Soccer & Society* 11:1-2 (December 2009):2, <http://doi.org/10.1080/14660970903331284>.

⁸⁷ Slabbert Mogajane, “Assessing the importance of spectators to soccer clubs in South Africa: A management perspective,” *Acta Commer*, vol.19, n.1 (2019): pp.1-10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ac.v19i1.633>.

⁸⁸ Ben Morse, “Where are the crowds at the World Athletics Championships?” *CNN*, October 1, 2019, [World Athletics Championships: Where are all the crowds in Doha? - CNN](http://www.cnn.com/2019/10/01/sport/athletics-championships-doha-crowds/index.html).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ QatarIsBooMING Editors, “The audience are reluctant to attend football matches at stadiums,” QatarIsBooMING, January 25, 2014, <http://www.qatarisbooming.com/article/audience-are-reluctant-attend-football-matches-stadiums>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² France 24, “Migrant workers in Qatar: We’re paid to attend football games,” *France 24*, March 14, 2014, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20140314-migrant-workers-paid-qatar-football>.

football'. The ambition is to use the existing enthusiasm for the international game to increase local fan engagement.

5.2 Controversies – World Cup in Qatar

Qatar came into the international spotlight for numerous reasons following its successful bid for the World Cup.⁹³ The controversies that included corruption relating to the bidding process, human rights in Qatar and the unsuitable climate did lead to a rather critical discourse in international football around the upcoming Qatari World Cup. The different issues have mainly dominated the debate around Qatar hosting the tournament, and the Gulf nation has been under severe pressure to address the variety of concerns that existed.⁹⁴

Since 2010 the focus has mostly been on the controversies surrounding the vote in 2010, in which many board members at FIFA were investigated and prosecuted for bribery.⁹⁵ Since then, Qatar has faced scrutiny for its human rights records, workers' welfare and how Qatar actively engages in international politics.⁹⁶

Qatar has repeatedly pointed to the significance of the upcoming tournament as it would constitute the first time the World Cup in football is held in a Muslim-majority country. Also, FIFA brings up the well-known "arab hospitality" to visitors bound for Qatar for the tournament. The Qatari Emir himself mentioned in his first speech to the newly elected Shura council in October 2021 that the Qatari hospitality would be essential to show the world when the tournament kicks off. The same council has previously been sceptical of the international scrutiny regarding internal affairs in Qatar such as labour rights.

⁹³ Lysa, "Globalized," 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Kevin Draper and Tariq Panja, "U.S. Says FIFA Officials Were Bribed to Award World Cups to Russia and Qatar," New York times, April 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

i. The controversial bid that succeeded
Qatar is the first country in the Middle East and North Africa region to host the World Cup. Morocco has failed several times previously with bids to bring the tournament to North Africa.⁹⁷ It is usually very challenging to win a bid for the World Cup, and the surprise was echoed across the football community when Qatar was named the host of the World Cup in 2022.⁹⁸

The aftermath led to probes into allegations of widespread corruption related to the Qatari bid.⁹⁹ Allegations built on how Qatar used its financial muscles to lobby support for their bid, particularly amongst countries in Africa and South America.¹⁰⁰ On top of that, FIFA themselves had to initiate an internal investigation as corruption claims within their organization were raised in several media outlets.¹⁰¹ The controversies led to criminal investigations being undertaken by Switzerland and the United States, with top FIFA officials arrested and indicted for alleged bribes and corruption.¹⁰² In 2015, despite being re-elected in the FIFA congress earlier the same year, FIFA President Sepp Blatter resigned amid the ongoing investigations on corruption.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Ewan Morgan, "WHY DOES MOROCCO KEEP BIDDING, AND FAILING, TO HOST THE WORLD CUP?," *These Football Times*, April 2, 2019, [Why does Morocco keep bidding, and failing, to host the World Cup? \(thesefootballtimes.co\)](https://www.thesefootballtimes.co.uk/why-does-morocco-keep-bidding-and-failing-to-host-the-world-cup/).

⁹⁸ Lysa, "Globalized," 7.

⁹⁹ Draper, "U.S. Says FIFA Officials," 2020.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

ii. Migrants in Qatar

Qatar's human rights records have placed the Emirate under tremendous pressure. In particular, the working conditions for migrant workers have concerned many human rights organizations.¹⁰⁴ Working conditions could involve a hot summer, long working hours, inadequate living conditions and pay theft.¹⁰⁵ On top of that, the sponsorship system known as the kafala system¹⁰⁶ has been heavily criticized for monitoring the migrant workers and stripping them of many rights.¹⁰⁷

The apparent exploitation of migrant workers has drawn accusations against Qatar that their upcoming tournament is built on slavery.¹⁰⁸ The growing call for action from the authority led to a comprehensive agreement between the International Labour Organization and Qatar to reform the labour market in the host nation.¹⁰⁹ The issue has already led to calls for a boycott of the tournament and increased the pressure on Football Associations across Europe to not participate in the tournament.¹¹⁰

In 2020, a new labour reform was announced with a sense of optimism that the situation in Qatar could change for the better.¹¹¹ A non-discriminatory minimum wage, requirements on living standards for migrant workers, the abolishment of the sponsorship system and numerous other changes to the Qatari laws would improve the rights of migrant workers.¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ Lysa, "Globalized," 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Under the Kafala system a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (kafeel) for their contract period. The migrant worker cannot enter the country, transfer employment nor leave the country for any reason without first obtaining explicit written permission from the kafeel. The worker must be sponsored by a kafeel in order to enter the destination country and remains tied to this kafeel throughout their stay. The kafeel must report to the immigration authorities if the migrant worker leaves their employment and must ensure the worker leaves the country after the contract ends, including paying for the flight home. Often the kafeel exerts further control over the migrant worker by confiscating their passport and travel documents, despite legislation in some destination countries that declares this practice illegal. **Source:** Baldwin-Edwards, M. (2011) Labour Immigration and Labour Markets in the GCC Countries: National Patterns and Trends, Research Paper, London School of Economics – Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance, and Globalisation in the Gulf States. Available at <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/kuwait/documents/Baldwin-Edwards,%20Martin.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Lysa, "Globalized," 10.

¹⁰⁸ Pete Pattison, "Revealed: Qatar's World Cup 'slaves'," *The Guardian*, 25 September, 2013, [Revealed: Qatar's World Cup 'slaves' | Slavery | The Guardian](#).

¹⁰⁹ ILO, "Changes in the labour market in Qatar: Dismantling the kafala system and introducing a minimum wage mark new era for Qatar labour market," *International Labour Organization*, August 30, 2020, [Changes in the labour market in Qatar: Dismantling the kafala system and introducing a minimum wage mark new era for Qatar labour market \(ilo.org\)](#).

¹¹⁰ Pete Pattison, "Revealed," 2013.

¹¹¹ ILO, "Changes," 2020.

¹¹² Ibid.

The reform implemented in 2021 has resulted in many improvements. However, the pressure has continued as more advancements are demanded, and lack of implementation is further criticized.¹¹³

iii. Climate and weather

The very high temperatures in Qatar during the summer had many claims that Qatar was not an appropriate host for a football tournament held during the summer.¹¹⁴ The concerns were based on the athletes' health that would play in such a heat. FIFA responded to the criticism by moving the entire tournament to November and December, months where the temperature drops significantly. The change led to further criticism as many pointed toward the consequences it would have for the club tournaments and domestic leagues across the world being forced to rearrange their season schedule. FIFA defended their decision as it reiterated its stance that FIFA can not discriminate against certain regions from hosting the tournament due to high temperatures.¹¹⁵ The argument based on inclusivity triumphed over the issues that could arise from the tournament occurring during November and December.

5.3 Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

In 2017, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain cut all diplomatic ties with Qatar, and announced that they would halt all land, air and sea traffic with Qatar.¹¹⁶ The surprising set of events was followed by a list of demands that Qatar had to fulfil in order for the blockade to be lifted. The Saudi coalition accused Qatar of sponsoring terrorism and meddling in their internal affairs.¹¹⁷ Among the demands was that Qatar had to shut down the Al Jazeera Media Network, closing the Turkish military base in Qatar and paying reparations for years of alleged wrongdoings.¹¹⁸ Qatar refused to meet the demands, and vehemently denied any of the accusations.

¹¹³ Amnesty, "REALITY CHECK: MIGRANT WORKERS RIGHTS WITH TWO YEARS TO QATAR 2022 WORLD CUP," Amnesty, accessed 15 April, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/02/reality-check-migrant-workers-rights-with-two-years-to-qatar-2022-world-cup/>.

¹¹⁴ Lysa, "Globalized," 12.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Mitch Phillips, "Boycott nations demand FIFA strips Qatar of 2022 World Cup – report," *Reuters*, July 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ozasp-uk-soccer-worldcup-qatar-idAFKBN1A1070-OZASP>

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

The boycotting nations also sent a letter to FIFA to strip Qatar of the tournament with claims that Qatar is funding terrorism.¹¹⁹ While the accusations raised concerns in Germany, FIFA made it clear that the blockade would not affect the World Cup. Qatar dismissed the accusations and made it clear that the preparations would proceed with a minor cost increase.¹²⁰ The diplomatic fallout lasted until 2021, when Qatar met the blockading countries in the Saudi city al-Ula to restore ties and set differences aside.¹²¹

However, the blockade did demonstrate that Qatar as a small state in the Gulf region is vulnerable as they experienced a full-scale blockade from their closest allies. Therefore, gaining a relevant position in the international community as a small state was meaningful. The announcement that came months after the embargo started was therefore not very surprising. Qatar announced that it would commit to a series of labour reforms and cooperate with the ILO to reach its objectives.¹²² The move to invite the UN agency to reform its labour system was an important step to counter the criticism from the international community in the midst of the ongoing blockade.

The blockade also had an impact particularly on the Qatari national team. Two years after the blockade was imposed on Qatar, the United Arab Emirates met Qatar in the Emirati capital Abu Dhabi to battle for a place at the Asian Cup final.¹²³ While free tickets were offered to Emiratis to fill the stadium in Abu Dhabi, a large crowd turned out in Doha to watch the game in the city centre.¹²⁴ A hostile crowd throwing shoes at the Qatari players did not hinder the guests winning convincingly at Abu Dhabi this evening. Celebrations erupted in Doha as thousands of Qataris celebrated the historical win.¹²⁵ There is little doubt that the political circumstances had led to a sense of nationalism leading to an increased fan engagement. The fan engagement towards local football and the national team was not the same.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Frank Gardner, "Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with emirate," *BBC*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55538792>.

¹²² ILO, "Changes," 2020.

¹²³ Al Jazeera, "Qatar trash UAE to reach Asian Cup football final," *Al Jazeera*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2019/1/30/qatar-trash-uae-to-reach-asian-cup-football-final>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

A record turnout was announced following the quarter-final fixture between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the FIFA Arab Cup in 2021.¹²⁶ An attendance of 63,439 was the highest ever attendance in a Qatari football match and compared to the domestic league matches that gather between 2000 and 10,000 fans, this amount was significant.¹²⁷ The turnout has consistently been much higher in the national team fixtures, but the gap soared in the FIFA Arab Cup in 2021 that Qatar hosted.¹²⁸

The drivers behind the high fan engagement for the national team is the strong will to support the country when facing international competition but was strengthened due to the political crisis that the blockade imposed on Qatar constituted. However, this has not affected the lower fan engagement for the local football.

¹²⁶ John McAuley, "UAE crash out of FIFA Arab Cup with 5-0 quarter-final defeat in Qatar," The National News, December 11, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/sport/football/2021/12/11/uae-crash-out-of-fifa-arab-cup-with-5-0-quarter-final-defeat-in-qatar/>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

6. Analysis and discussion

6.1 In the field – findings from Qatar¹²⁹

In Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, the evening did not unfold pleasantly for Laurent Blanc as disappointed Al Rayyan fans yelled “Laurent Blanc Out” as they were losing to Al Gharafa. Having lost the Emir Cup finale, the past few weeks have been difficult for the French head coach. He was brought in from France to steer the team towards silverware and has struggled to deliver on those ambitions.

Al Rayyan, for example, the last time they won the league was in 2016, and Laurent Blanc, who arrived in Al Rayyan two years ago, failed to bring in more silverware. With more than 13 different coaches carrying nine different nationalities since 2010, international profiles have been substantial on Al Rayyan.¹³⁰ However, the impact has not improved the results or mobilized more fans and support. This was a recurring sentiment among many fans I encountered in Qatar and not only reserved for Al Rayyan supporters.

i. Matchday experience

A crucial recommendation from the report issued by Deloitte on Fan Engagement was to improve the matchday experience.¹³¹ The importance of availability, catering, parking and quality of services were all highlighted. In all the games, there was a strong presence of staff and personnel that offered a high quality of services. The parking spaces were substantial and the quality of the venues and infrastructure was impressive.

However, the quality of the catering was not that impressive. From a small barrack outside the stadium, attendees could buy coffee, tea or water. The presence of paid foreign workers with drums and responsible for chanting the club songs and contributing to a better fan experience was very interesting to observe. In particular, when a team was losing, the fans would yell at the paid workers to quit singing and chanting, while fans in general seemed to appreciate the paid foreign workers' contribution to the fan experience. However, this did not constitute the type of matchday experience that would draw out attendees in large numbers.

¹²⁹ This chapter includes notes from the fieldwork conducted in Qatar. The notes remain a part of the submission for MES4610 in the Autumn Semester of 2021. Information retrieved from this submission will be used throughout this chapter.

¹³⁰ “Al Rayyan – Manager History,” World Football Net, accessed 19 April, 2022.

<https://www.worldfootball.net/teams/al-rayyan/9/>.

¹³¹ Cory-Wright, “A Middle East.”

ii. Turnout

The turnout was very low in all matches, and at most, 20% of the seats were occupied. One could wonder if the low turnout was due to the heavy Covid-19 restrictions. There were not any restrictions that denied a larger turnout, but the overall spread of the virus and the imposed mask-mandate might have dropped the appetite of many to attend the games physically. However, massive turnout for the national team fixtures does weaken that claim.

The low turnout did create an impression that there was not a large engagement for local football in the population. The games I attended was between the best clubs in Qatar and the turnout was not that high. This despite the attempt of many Qatari clubs to leverage the popularity of international football by signing major international football profiles. Instead, many found it frustrating that major profiles would arrive in Qatar, and not contribute more to the improvement of the teams they sign for.

6.2 Deloitte recommendations - applicability for Qatar

Deloitte stated that despite the role of international football as a major driver for the overall interest in sport, it was not a role to the exclusion of the local game.¹³² Qatar did appeal to international football as the report points out. Qatar hosting major events such as the Club World Cup in 2020 and signing several international profiles does echo the first recommendation on “Leverage the popularity of international football.” To host the tournament that would crown the best club in the world, attract the most talented football players and host the biggest football event was all-important to increase the local interest for football.¹³³

The report shed light on the variety of challenges regarding fan engagement and offered solutions at the end of the report to increase local fan engagement. The first recommendation focuses on the influence of international football as a tool to increase local fan engagement.¹³⁴ The second solution encourages an improved matchday experience, while the third addresses the importance of meeting outside the stadiums. The recommendations based on the study findings apply to Qatar as the country was a part of the case study carried out by Deloitte and

¹³²Cory-Wright, “A Middle East”.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Josoor Institute.¹³⁵ It is however the first recommendation that is of particular interest to this research question.

1. Leverage the popularity of international football

Middle East football fans follow European football with great enthusiasm. The challenge is to find ways of tapping into this enthusiasm and connecting it to the local game. Whatever the tactics, the strategy must be to convince fans that what they love about following European football, they can also find in the local game.¹³⁶

The first recommendation sheds light on the positive effect international football might have on local fan engagement and leveraging the popularity of international football to ignite the enthusiasm for the domestic league. At the same time, the issue as the figure below states, is that the primary motivator for the international team is different to the local team.¹³⁷ The competitiveness in international football is what increases fan engagement, while family, friends and residency motivate the fan engagement towards the local team.¹³⁸

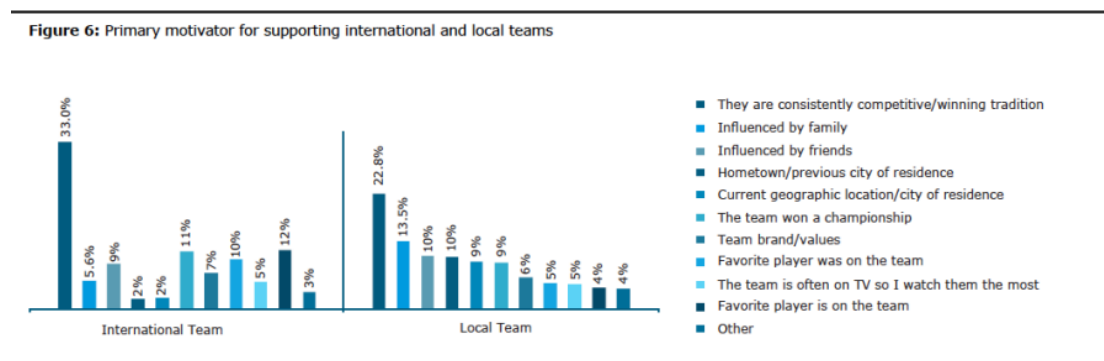


Figure 6: Primary motivator for supporting international and local teams¹³⁹

Football profiles have arrived in Qatar in large numbers for the past decade, with the host country aiming to boost the interest in the domestic league. However, the influx of international players has not contributed to increasing the fan engagement to the extent present for the national team, or to the extent of fan engagement towards international football.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Cory-Wright, "A Middle East".

¹³⁷ Bridgewater, "Middle East," 19.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 20.

Most people still have a strong connection with their clubs but they are frustrated because their teams don't win anymore. But the competition is not fair anymore, there are teams [that] are getting paid more, having stronger players and have a lot of support from the strong people in the country, so every sheikh will take one team, he will give money and bring players and [the other teams] are left behind, but they still love their teams but they don't go to the stadium, they are not connected anymore.¹⁴⁰

The people that have a strong connection with their club is mostly those that have a tribal identity closely linked to a Qatari club. These fans have been used to a fair competition between the teams, but this has changed due to the globalization of football. The fan quoted above claims that the increased financial spending on purchasing new players have led to a less competitive league, hence a deteriorating attendance in matches. In that case, the strategy to leverage international football to increase local fan engagement would have had an opposite impact on Qatari football. This is interesting to compare to the national team as the turnout is much higher due to the popularity of the national team and their competitiveness in international tournaments in which they have performed well. If the competitiveness is decreasing due to the increased spending on international players by certain clubs, it makes sense that the attendance could decrease as well. As this fan quoted above puts it, a lack of connection could result in fans remaining at home instead of attending the games.

In 2018, the Spanish El Pais identified Qatar as the country with the highest investments per capita in football.¹⁴¹ The absence of competitiveness and fan engagement is still present at the club level. As teams aim to boost their ranks with international football profiles, they still struggle to create an atmosphere that galvanizes people to return to the stands. This was reflected in all matches I observed and is reflected in statistics.¹⁴² The current state shows the national team gaining widespread support and enthusiasm due to its success in international tournaments. The domestic league has seen clubs investing in global profiles but struggling to attain the strong position in society they would hope for with the Qatari Super League.

¹⁴⁰ Lysa, "Globalized"

¹⁴¹ Jorge Ovalle, "How much has Qatar invested to take its football to where it is?" *Latin American Post*, June 18, 2019. <https://latinamericanpost.com/28541-how-much-has-qatar-invested-to-take-its-football-to-where-it-is>.

¹⁴² Nasrallah, "Why People."

6.3 Consequences of leveraging the popularity of Football

In the quantitative survey conducted by Sue Bridgewater, the overall impression is that the interest for the local game is high among the participants.¹⁴³ The survey includes several countries from the region, and a separate category named ‘Gulf states’ refer to Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁴⁴ In the figure, it is apparent that there is a substantial interest in both international football and local football.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, it does appear logical to leverage international football in order to increase the local fan engagement.

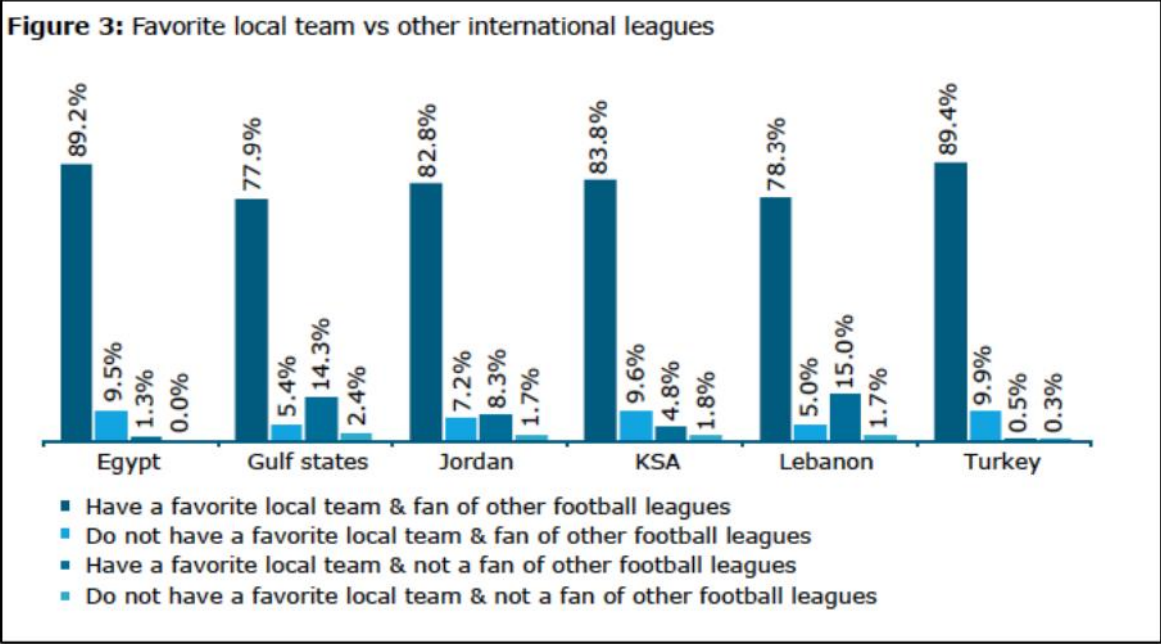


Figure 3: Favorite local team vs other international leagues¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Sue Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 16.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

At the same time, the figure below does illustrate a larger interest for local clubs amongst a minority in Gulf states compared to other countries.¹⁴⁷ Lysa points to the influential role of the tribal identity in the Qatari society.¹⁴⁸ The intertwined relations between teams and tribal identities in particular.¹⁴⁹ The concern Lysa raises is if the decision-makers in Qatar focus too much on the globalization of Qatar, and less on the local fan base that is already present.¹⁵⁰ She used the term ‘glocal-ness’ to describe how the authorities can balance this in a sustainable fashion.¹⁵¹

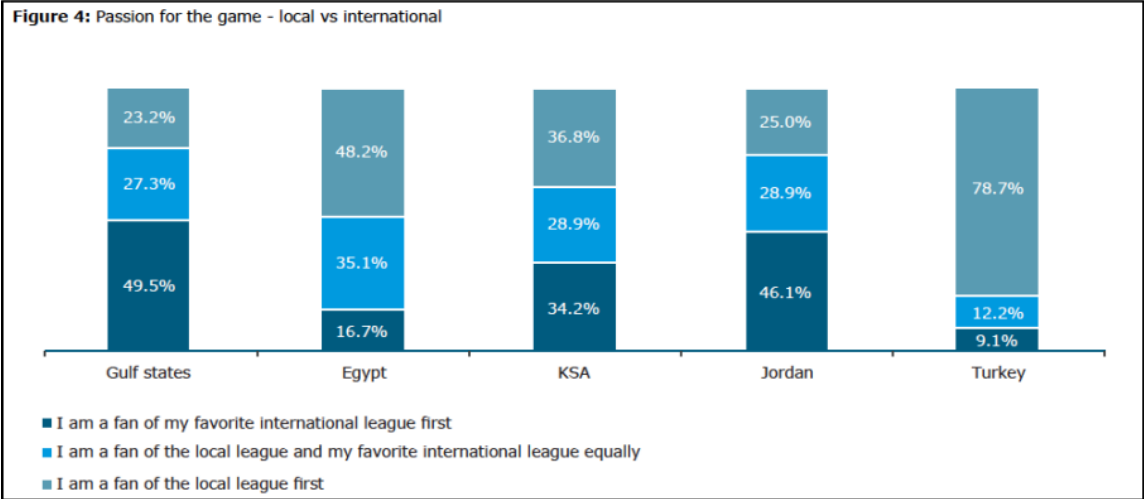


Figure 4: Passion for the game – local vs international¹⁵²

In this figure, the engagement towards the international league ranks above the local league amongst roughly half of the participants.¹⁵³ Less than a quarter of the participants have a higher interest for the local league compared to the international football. This does portray a majority that Qatari authorities can approach in order to increase their engagement in local football.¹⁵⁴ It confirms the potential that exists in approaching those that are yet to attend games albeit having interest in football. It is pivotal for Qatar to engage more with these participants if they want to increase the engagement for the local football.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
¹⁴⁸ Lysa, “Globalized,” 14.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid.
¹⁵¹ Ibid.
¹⁵² Sue Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 18.
¹⁵³ Ibid.
¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

The views that Lysa raised reflects well on the findings from the fieldwork in Qatar.¹⁵⁵ The attendees from all the games were not many, but those that came had a strong identity in relation to the clubs they supported. Singing with the club chants, wearing the club scarves with their children wearing them as well. Those that encountered me during the games I attended seemed to be well oriented on the situation for their respective teams. That illustrates a small but invested fan base. It is a fan base that is valuable for Qatari clubs today, but also the same fans that expressed concerns with the direction Qatari football is taking. It is this fan base that exist in Qatar, and the issue for the authorities is to proceed with its efforts without addressing these concerns. The consequences of failing might not only be that the fan engagement fails to increase, but also that the local fan base becomes weakened.

These are concerns that were expressed directly to Lysa with the supporter complaining about the presence of international football players.¹⁵⁶

“I don’t even watch the national team. Most of them are not Qataris. You’re not supporting home-grown talent. When I watch Manchester United, because a lot of them are home-grown, I am more connected with them than with my own country. When I watch my national team, there’s a guy named Fabio! You know what I mean?”¹⁵⁷

The comments came from ‘Mozah, a Qatari football supporter.¹⁵⁸ She is not alone to have these views. It resembles the shouts from Al Rayyan supporters angry with Laurent Blanc. Some of them even yelled at Steven Nzonzi, a French professional with international caps and a background from the top leagues in Italy, Spain and England. His debut appearance in Qatar had not been successful, and frustrated fans did not have much patience with the French national.

“The enemy they say is the One Man Stand. Having the world witnessing one guy watching the games. They can’t believe really that people will run to the stadiums to watch finished retired uncles?”

This was the giggling response from an attendee when I asked for his views on Nzonzi continuing his career in Al Rayyan. He has supported Al Rayyan for two decades, but his frustration with the new foreign players was apparent. He was outspoken, a familiar face for the other attendees hugging and kissing as they swirled past him frequently where we sat.

¹⁵⁵ Lysa, “Globalized,” 15

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

For those that already claim an interest in the local league, a vast majority have been ‘lifelong fans’ such as the latter Al Rayyan fan I mentioned.¹⁵⁹ The ‘lifelong fan’ is according to Bridgewater the individual that has supported his team since the childhood.¹⁶⁰ The 39% constitute a high number, and yet again strengthen the argument about the intertwined ties of tribal identity and football teams.¹⁶¹ The figure below also illustrates almost the same amount of participants taking interest in the local game in the past decade. In the past year alone, more than a quarter have had an interest duration that has lasted for less than three years.¹⁶² This does illustrate the fan engagement proceeding in a positive direction for Qatar, albeit this not reflecting that much on the attendance in stadiums.¹⁶³

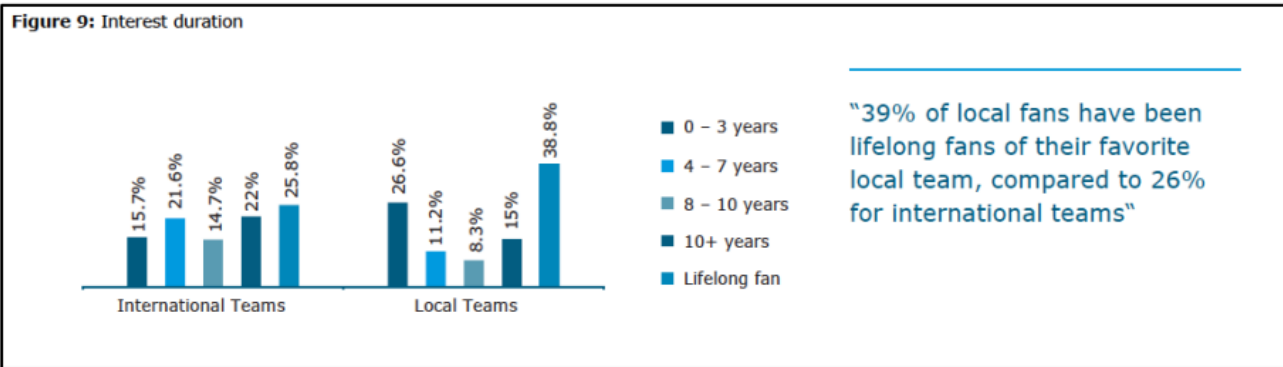


Figure 9: Interest duration¹⁶⁴

Therefore, it is apparent that there is a legitimate concern for a conflict. The recommendation from Deloitte to leverage international football has been widely adopted.¹⁶⁵ At the same time fan engagement is not increasing in the venues, despite surveys suggesting an overall high interest in football. The fan base in Qatar has a strong historical background, is founded on tribal identities, but this is not sufficient for the ambitions as the authorities seek to engage with a wider part of the population. With the motivation to increase the local fan engagement, the danger is that the established fan base will be weakened or cease to exist.

¹⁵⁹ Sue Bridgewater, “Middle East,” 20.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
¹⁶¹ Ibid.
¹⁶² Ibid.
¹⁶³ Ibid.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
¹⁶⁵ Cory-Wright, “A Middle East”

A survey conducted by the Qatari Football Association asked Qatari resident for the key reasons for them not attending football games.¹⁶⁶ More than 60% claimed that lack of local fan engagement was the reason for their absence. Among the younger fans, the share was even higher as more than 77% refused to attend due to this reason. More than 69% claimed that traffic congestion reduced their interest in attending.¹⁶⁷ This did confirm the impression that the long distance between venues and public transportation led to many choosing cars to arrive at the venues. If all the attendees choose the same transportation method, the consequences will be congestion and traffic. However, I did not get the understanding that there was an ambition to influence fans to choose the metro instead of their cars. An overwhelming majority of Qatari households own at least two cars or more.

At the same time, the overwhelming turnout in national team fixtures does illustrate the potential that exists for the domestic league. However, the applied strategy of leveraging international football has not utilized the existing potential. On the contrary, the heavy investments and the weakened competitiveness amongst teams might have led to a negative impact on the fan engagement.¹⁶⁸ Both the ninth figure and the figure below amplifies the correlation between tribal identity and fan engagement that Lysa addressed. The ninth figure due to the long duration of support for local teams signaling strong traditions, but also the below figure depicting the factors of influence (family, friends and residency) being substantially more influential for the local team compared to the international team.¹⁶⁹

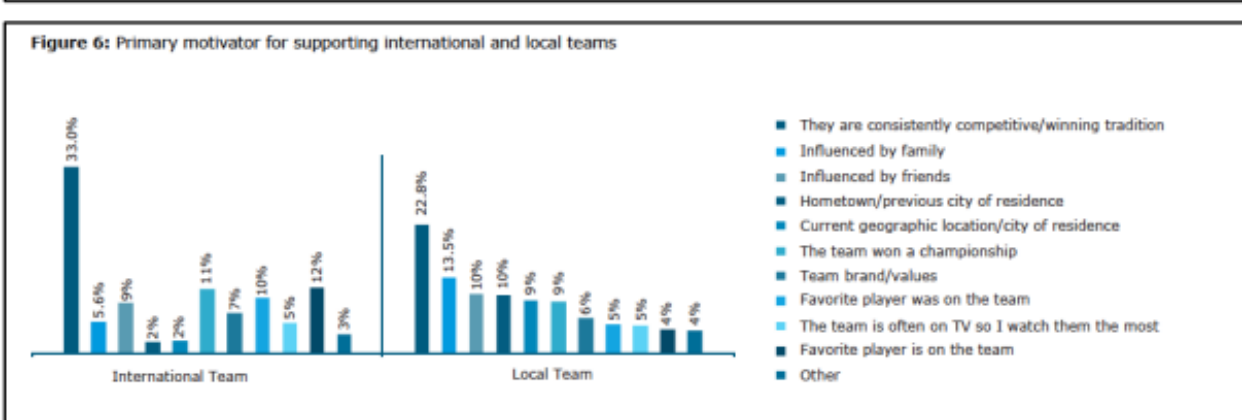


Figure 6: Primary motivator for supporting international and local teams.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Victoria Scott, "Survey: Qatar football fans put off by weather, teams' skill levels," *Doha News*, January 26, 2014, [Survey: Qatar football fans put off by weather, teams' skill levels - Doha News | Qatar](#)

¹⁶⁷ Scott, "Survey."

¹⁶⁸ Lysa, "Globalized," 14.

¹⁶⁹ Bridgewater, "Middle East," 19.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

'The Lone Spectator' stands as a symbol of the perception of Qatari football that authorities are vehemently battling. As the World Cup is fast approaching, it has been crucial for the upcoming host to increase local fan engagement. Leveraging the popularity of international football to fill the stadiums in the Qatari league matches was an important strategy. Based on the findings, it can be established that the globalization of Qatari football has had an impact on local fan engagement. The contribution from Lysa did shed light on the concerns among many Qatari fans. Lysa warns against local fan engagement losing out on the overall globalization of Qatari football.

There are strong indications that local fan engagement in Qatar has not increased as a result of the globalization of Qatari football. On the contrary, the consequences have seemingly led to increased frustration and dissatisfaction amongst the fan base with strong historical tribal connection to the Qatari clubs. While surveys suggest that there is a high interest in local football, this does not reflect on the turnout of attendees in the football games. Qatari residents not having a strong motivation for local football remains as one of the largest reasons for the low turnout. As the world cup is fast approaching, the turnout numbers for the local games remain low, and 'The Lone Spectator' stereotype glooms over the local football. For the established fan base, targeting 'The Lone Spectator' narrative has been perceived as neglecting their presence in Qatari football. Albeit not being able to fill stadiums, they have attended and shown support for their teams. They believe that the globalization of Qatari football leads to a further lack of competitiveness and connection with the team, which in turn will worsen the local fan engagement.

At the same time, the attendance for the national team has been consistently higher. The higher turnout numbers are based on the popularity of the national team, which creates a sense of pride, its competitiveness and in particular in the aftermath of the imposed blockade. Some of these factors such as popularity and competitiveness are increasingly lacking in the domestic league according to Qatari fans. The leveraging of international football has in that case not had an impact of increasing fan engagement.

The research question was, "*How has the globalization of Qatari Football impacted local fan engagement?*" The globalization of Qatari football has led to the presence of many international football players, but it has not led to a substantial increase in attendance in Qatari football matches. On the contrary, the increasing dissatisfaction amongst the existing

fan base seem to illustrate that the globalization of Qatari football has rather had unwanted implications. Qatari football is going global, but it might come at a price. Leveraging international football has not led to the results that were intended.

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