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Symbolic Communication and Soft Power Projection of Participating Nations at the 2026 World Cup

Komunikasi Simbolik dan Proyeksi Soft Power Negara Peserta pada Piala Dunia FIFA 2026

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ABSTRAK

Piala Dunia FIFA 2026 menyediakan ruang komunikasi transnasional tempat negara-negara peserta memproduksi dan menyirkulasikan representasi simbolik identitas nasional di luar kompetisi teknis sepak bola. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis praktik komunikasi simbolik yang ditampilkan oleh negara-negara peserta sebagai instrumen proyeksi dan kontestasi potensi *soft power* dalam ruang publik global. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain Analisis Wacana Kritis model tiga dimensi Norman Fairclough (teks, praktik diskursif, dan praktik sosial), penelitian ini mengkaji korpus sebanyak 84 unit data komunikasi yang dikumpulkan secara purposif pada periode 10 Mei hingga 25 Juli 2026 dari 14 negara peserta. Korpus penelitian meliputi 28 dokumentasi visual dan unggahan resmi pemerintah, asosiasi sepak bola nasional, serta FIFA; 42 laporan media berita internasional; dan 14 siaran pers institusional. Melalui reduksi data dan kategorisasi tematik induktif, hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi enam bentuk komunikasi simbolik yang saling berkaitan: (1) simbol kapasitas dan keamanan aparatus negara, (2) ritual solidaritas publik dan diaspora, (3) representasi warisan budaya nasional, (4) simbol dukungan kepemimpinan eksekutif politik, (5) artikulasi nilai sosial dan kewargaan, serta (6) penceritaan digital strategis oleh federasi nasional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kontestasi potensi *soft power* berlangsung melalui dialektika antara simbolisme formal negara dan partisipasi kultural warga yang dimediasi oleh pembingkaian media internasional. Studi ini memperluas kajian diplomasi olahraga dengan menggeser fokus analisis dari negara tuan rumah ke agensi diskursif negara-negara peserta.

Kata Kunci: Soft Power; Komunikasi Simbolik; Piala Dunia FIFA 2026; Diplomasi Olahraga; Analisis Wacana Kritis.

ABSTRACT

The 2026 FIFA World Cup provides a transnational communicative arena where participating nations produce and circulate symbolic representations of national identity beyond technical athletic competition. This study aims to analyze how symbolic communication practices enacted by participating countries operate as instruments of soft power projection and discursive contestation within the global public sphere. Employing a qualitative approach guided by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (text, discursive practice, and social practice), this study examines a purposively selected corpus of 84 communicative units collected between May 10 and July 25, 2026, spanning 14 participating nations. The corpus comprises 28 official audiovisual and social media posts from governments, national football associations, and FIFA; 42 international media reports; and 14 institutional press releases. Through inductive data reduction and thematic categorization, the findings identify six interrelated forms of symbolic communication: (1) state apparatus capacity and security symbols, (2) public and diaspora solidarity rituals, (3) national cultural heritage representations, (4) executive political leadership endorsements, (5) civic value and national character enactments, and (6) strategic digital storytelling by national federations. The findings demonstrate that soft power projection operates through the interplay of top-down institutional rituals and bottom-up civic performances mediated by international journalism and digital platforms. This study contributes to sports diplomacy scholarship by shifting analytical attention from host-nation branding to the multi-actor discursive agency of participating states.

Keywords: *Soft Power; Symbolic Communication; 2026 FIFA World Cup; Sports Diplomacy; Critical Discourse Analysis.*

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INTRODUCTION

Mega-sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup operate not merely as athletic tournaments but as highly mediated transnational communicative arenas in which state and non-state actors project competing narratives of national identity, institutional prestige, and moral legitimacy (Rofe, 2022). In the contemporary hybrid media environment, the communicative significance of the tournament is no longer monopolized by the organizing host nations or the governing body itself. Rather, each participating nation enters the tournament equipped with distinct symbolic repertoires—ranging from state ceremonial protocols and diplomatic messaging to diaspora mobilization and digital storytelling—that transform off-field occurrences into globally circulated political and cultural texts (Brun & Gomez, 2022). Examining how participating countries produce, circulate, and negotiate these national symbols is therefore central to understanding how symbolic power is contested within international sport communication.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada between June 11 and July 19, 2026, generated a particularly rich and verifiable set of symbolic events involving participating nations before, during, and immediately after the competition. On July 13, 2026, following Norway's historic return to the tournament after a 28-year absence, the Royal Norwegian Air Force deployed two F-35 stealth fighter jets to flank the national team's charter aircraft as it re-entered Norwegian airspace ahead of a royal and public homecoming in Oslo—an event documented by the Norwegian Football Federation (*@herrelandslaget*) and amplified globally by international broadcasters such as Fox Soccer (Fox Soccer, 2026; JFeed, 2026; Supercar Blondie, 2026). Conversely, in May and June 2026, escalating geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran prompted the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) to secure FIFA approval to relocate its official training base camp from Tucson, Arizona, across the border to Tijuana, Mexico, where the delegation operated under heavy Mexican armed security escorts while commuting to Group G matches in Los Angeles and Seattle (Al Jazeera, 2026; CBS News, 2026; Goal, 2026; The Guardian, 2026). Simultaneously, mass red-and-white vehicle convoys organized by Turkish supporters, vibrant diaspora parades by Moroccan, Argentine, and Mexican fans, and the widely reported post-match stadium-cleaning rituals performed by Japanese supporters circulated rapidly across global news outlets and digital platforms. Analytically, however, these episodes require careful distinction between the underlying operational or civic event, its mediated representation by news and digital platforms, and its ideological interpretation within international discourse.

To analyze these phenomena rigorously, this study conceptualizes **symbolic communication** as the strategic or ritualized deployment of multimodal signs—encompassing material state apparatuses, ceremonial protocols, collective bodily performances, cultural artifacts, and audiovisual narratives—through which collective actors articulate national identity and negotiate status in the international public sphere (Tomić, 2023; Vila-Lopez et al., 2024). Rather than treating symbols as self-evident or static carriers of meaning, this study operationalizes symbolic communication across four analytical indicators integrated with Norman Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): (1) *material and visual signifiers* (the concrete objects, uniforms, aircraft, flags, or gestures deployed); (2) *institutional authorship and intentionality* (whether the act originates from state security organs, political executives, sports federations, or grassroots citizens); (3) *discursive mediation and amplification* (how international journalism and social media algorithms frame and circulate the symbol); and (4) *socio-political embedding* (the historical, cultural, and geopolitical power relations that anchor its meaning).

Within international relations and public diplomacy scholarship, such symbolic practices are closely linked to Joseph S. Nye's (2004, 2023) concept of **soft power**, defined as the ability to shape international preferences through attraction and persuasion rooted in culture, political values, and legitimate policies rather than coercion (*hard power*). In the context of mega-sporting events, symbolic

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representations serve as communicative resources that project a nation's institutional competence, cultural richness, and civic ethos (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Kassimeris, 2024; Nikolaou et al., 2023). Nevertheless, a critical methodological distinction must be maintained between **(a) symbolic production and projection** by a participating nation, **(b) mediated visibility and potential attractiveness** within global media discourse, and **(c) actual audience reception or measurable foreign policy influence**. Because documentary and discourse analyses examine how meanings are constructed and contested in texts and media practices rather than surveying global public opinion directly, this study evaluates symbolic communication as a mechanism of *soft power projection and discursive contestation*—that is, how states and citizens compete to construct favorable national images and symbolic legitimacy on the global stage.

A comparative review of prior scholarship reveals three distinct streams of research at the intersection of sport communication, nation branding, and soft power, each leaving specific conceptual and empirical limitations. The first and most dominant stream focuses on **host-nation diplomacy and geopolitical branding**, examining how organizing states—such as Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup—invest state capital in infrastructure, cultural hospitality, and media management to enhance international prestige or counter critiques of *sportswashing* (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022; Brun & Gomez, 2022; Lo, 2023; Nikolaou et al., 2023). While illuminating the macro-politics of event hosting, this literature largely treats non-host participating countries as passive athletic participants within the host's communicative architecture. The second stream investigates **global sport governance and institutional crisis communication**, such as Rofe's (2022) analysis of FIFA's diplomatic autonomy and Kokholm et al.'s (2024) study of the failure of European football associations' *OneLove* campaign during the 2022 tournament. Although Kokholm et al. (2024) address participating teams, their focus is restricted to institutional regulatory compliance and activist retreat rather than the broader repertoire of national symbolic representation. The third stream examines **single-nation identity and semiotic representations**, including studies on national team jerseys (Aziz & Andriana, 2025), intercultural coaching norms in Japan and the United States (Babbitt, 2023), and sports icons in tourism branding (Tomić, 2023; Vila-Lopez et al., 2024). However, these studies rely primarily on static textual semiotics or marketing surveys and do not analyze how multiple participating states simultaneously mobilize state institutions, public rituals, and geopolitical narratives within a single tournament.

Consequently, the **research gap** addressed by this study is both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, existing sports diplomacy scholarship lacks an integrated critical discourse framework that explains how participating nations—operating outside the privileged institutional position of the host country—convert both hard-power state apparatuses (military escorts, security protocols) and bottom-up civic-cultural performances into soft power signifiers. Empirically, no comparative study has systematically mapped the multi-actor symbolic practices across participating nations during the expanded 48-team 2026 FIFA World Cup. By conceptualizing the tournament as an *order of discourse* (Fairclough, 1995) in which participating delegations, national publics, and international media negotiate competing representations of national identity, this study offers a novel multi-actor perspective that bridges critical discourse studies and soft power theory.

Based on this background and research gap, this study addresses two explicit research questions: (1) *What forms of symbolic communication were produced and circulated by participating nations during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?* and (2) *How are these symbolic practices discursively constructed across textual, media-discursive, and socio-political dimensions to project national identity and contest soft power potential in the global public sphere?* Accordingly, this study aims to categorize the forms of symbolic communication enacted by participating nations, critically interpret their discursive construction using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, and explain their implications for soft power projection in contemporary international sport communication.

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RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach using Norman Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2013) **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** within a comparative multiple-case study design. Fairclough's CDA was specifically selected over Barthesian semiotics or classical media framing analysis for three methodological reasons. First, whereas structural semiotics focuses primarily on decoding internal sign relations within isolated texts (such as a team jersey or photograph), Fairclough's model situates multimodal texts within their institutional conditions of production and cross-platform distribution. Second, unlike standard framing analysis, which emphasizes journalistic selection and salience, CDA explicitly interrogates how power relations, state ideologies, and geopolitical asymmetries shape why certain national symbols are legitimized, securitized, or celebrated in global discourse (Fairclough, 2013; Marzuki, 2023; Prayogi, 2023). In this study, the **unit of analysis** comprises discrete multimodal communicative events—encompassing visual footage, official captions, press statements, and journalistic narratives—associated with the symbolic practices of participating nations during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Data collection was conducted over a defined observation period from **May 10 to July 25, 2026**, capturing three chronological phases: the pre-tournament preparation and team departure/relocation phase (May 10–June 10, 2026), the tournament competition phase (June 11–July 19, 2026), and the immediate post-tournament homecoming phase (July 20–25, 2026, including earlier knockout-stage homecomings such as Norway's return on July 13, 2026). Using **purposive sampling**, the researchers compiled a total corpus of **84 communicative units** representing **14 participating nations** across five confederations: Norway, France, Italy, Türkiye, and Croatia (UEFA); Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia (CONMEBOL); Morocco (CAF); Iran, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and South Korea (AFC); alongside Mexico, Canada, and New Zealand (CONCACAF/OFC). Inclusion criteria required that each unit: (1) was published within the May 10–July 25, 2026 observation window; (2) depicted a non-technical symbolic, ceremonial, cultural, security, or civic practice linked to a participating national team; (3) achieved cross-border visibility in international media or generated a minimum of 10,000 interactions on verified official social media accounts; and (4) could be cross-verified through at least two independent primary or journalistic sources. Purely technical match highlights, commercial sponsor advertisements, and unverified anonymous fan rumors were excluded. The structure of the 84-unit research corpus is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the Research Data Corpus, Sources, and Analytical Units (May 10 – July 25, 2026)

Data Source Cluster	Specific Platforms / Institutions / Outlets	Number of Units	Primary Analytical Focus
Primary Audiovisual & Social Media Documentation	Verified accounts of national football associations (*@herrelandslaget*, JFA, TFF, FMF, FRMF), FIFA digital channels, and Fox Soccer (*Instagram*, *X*, *TikTok*, *YouTube*)	28 units	Visual composition, camera angles, emblems, captions, hashtags, and visible audience engagement metrics.
International & National Media Reports	*The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *CBS News*, *Goal*, *Fox Sports*, *Dagbladet*, *JFeed*, and *Supercar Blondie* (May–July 2026)	42 articles	Headline framing, lexical choices, source attribution, and geopolitical contextualization of events.
Official State & Institutional Releases	Government press statements, Armed Forces / Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefings, and federation communiqués (Iran FFIRI, Norway Forsvaret, Mexican & Moroccan cultural ministries)	14 documents	Official policy rationale, diplomatic protocol language, and state legitimacy claims.
Total Corpus	14 participating nations across 3 tournament phases	84 units	Triangulated across Fairclough's textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions.

Source: Compiled by the authors from research coding protocols (2026).

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Data analysis operationalized Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional framework through concrete analytical procedures applied to every unit in the corpus. First, at the **textual and visual dimension (*micro-analysis*)**, each item was coded for lexical choices (e.g., metaphors of heroism, sovereignty, or civic duty), visual signifiers (e.g., military formation proximity in cockpit footage, national flag density in street convoys, traditional attire in cultural festivals), and multimodal juxtaposition (such as text overlays and music in short-form videos). Second, at the **discursive practice dimension (*meso-analysis*)**, the analysis traced institutional authorship, intertextuality, and circulation chains—examining how raw footage recorded by players or federation media officers (e.g., inside the Norwegian team charter plane) was repackaged by transnational sports networks (such as Fox Soccer) with English-language captions for global consumption. Third, at the **social practice dimension (*macro-analysis*)**, findings were interpreted against broader structural contexts, including Nordic defense modernization and welfare-state identity, U.S.–Iran diplomatic hostility and border securitization, diaspora identity politics in North America and Europe, and postcolonial cultural diplomacy.

To ensure methodological rigor and **data trustworthiness** (Fathurokhmah, 2024; Muhammad et al., 2023), the researchers implemented systematic **source triangulation** and a four-stage inductive coding protocol. Every viral social media clip was cross-referenced against mainstream journalistic reports and official institutional records to verify its exact date, location, and operational context. When discrepancies emerged between popular social media interpretations and factual records—most notably where viral posts portrayed Norway's F-35 escort as a pre-match display of force, whereas official records confirmed it took place on July 13, 2026 during the team's post-elimination homecoming flight, or where Iran's training camp move to Tijuana was sensationalized online versus its documented diplomatic-security rationale—the analysis explicitly recorded both the factual baseline and the discursive re-framing. Thematic categorization proceeded through (1) open coding of all 84 units, (2) axial grouping by **primary initiating actor** and **dominant symbolic resource**, (3) boundary refinement to eliminate category overlap (separating military/security state apparatus from executive political leaders, and separating federation digital storytelling campaigns from general media distribution), and (4) selective synthesis into six mutually distinct analytical categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inductive coding and categorization of the 84 communicative units across the three tournament phases demonstrate that participating nations projected national identity and negotiated global visibility through highly differentiated symbolic repertoires. To avoid conceptual overlap between categories, each communicative unit was classified according to two strict analytic criteria: **(1) the primary institutional or social locus of production** (state security apparatus, grassroots citizenry/diaspora, cultural diplomacy agencies, executive political leadership, civic supporter groups, or national federation digital teams) and **(2) the core symbolic modality deployed**. While nearly all events were eventually circulated online, the sixth category (*Strategic Federation Digital Storytelling*) is analytical bounded to original multimodal campaigns and vertical-video narratives purposefully produced by national football associations' media departments, rather than serving as a catch-all category for internet distribution. Based on these criteria, the six forms of symbolic communication and their empirical anchors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Typology of Symbolic Communication, Empirical Evidence, and Soft Power Projections of Participating Nations (2026 FIFA World Cup)

Symbolic Category & Locus	Nations Analyzed (Corpus Units)	Concrete Forms of Representation	Verified Empirical Evidence & Dates (2026)	Discursive Meaning & Soft Power Potential
1. State Apparatus & Security	Norway, France, Italy, Iran (16	Fighter jet homecoming escort, ceremonial	Royal Norwegian Air Force 2x F-35 escort (July 13,	Projects technological readiness, state

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Symbols (Military/Police)	units)	police motorcades, and cross-border base relocation under armed protection.	2026; Fox Soccer, 2026); Iran FFIRI base relocation from Tucson to Tijuana (May–June 2026; The Guardian, 2026).	protection, and sovereign resilience amid geopolitical or celebratory moments.
2. Public & Diaspora Solidarity Rituals (Grassroots)	Türkiye, Argentina, Morocco, Croatia, Colombia, Mexico (18 units)	Synchronized red-vehicle convoys, diaspora street marches, pyrotechnic fan zones, and giant flag displays.	Turkish diaspora red convoys in host cities & Istanbul (June 2026); Moroccan & Mexican mass fan marches in Los Angeles & Mexico City (June 2026).	Communicates collective passion, diaspora cohesion, and popular legitimacy of national representation.
3. Cultural Heritage Representation (Cultural Agencies)	Mexico, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Morocco (14 units)	Match-city cultural pavilions, traditional music/dance (*samba*, *mariachi*), indigenous attire, and culinary diplomacy.	Mexican cultural festivals around Estadio Azteca & U.S. fan zones (June 2026); Brazilian & Moroccan cultural showcases (June–July 2026).	Enhances cultural familiarity, aesthetic appeal, and tourism-oriented nation branding.
4. Executive Political Leadership Symbols (Heads of State)	Iran, Türkiye, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Norway (12 units)	Presidential/royal send-off ceremonies, palace receptions, and VIP stadium diplomacy by heads of state.	Tehran official presidential send-off for *Team Melli* (May 14, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026); Norwegian Royal Family Oslo homecoming reception (July 13, 2026).	Aligns executive political authority with popular national pride and bilateral diplomatic visibility.
5. National Values & Civic Character (Supporter Groups)	Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (11 units)	Post-match stadium litter collection by fans, locker-room gratitude notes, and inclusivity/fair-play pledges.	Japanese fans cleaning stadium stands after Group stage matches (June 2026); co-host Canada & ANZAC inclusivity initiatives (June 2026).	Cultivates moral authority, civic discipline, and value-based international respect without overt politics.
6. Strategic Federation Digital Storytelling (FA Media Teams)	14 participating national football associations (13 units)	Cinematic behind-the-scenes vertical reels, player heritage mini-documentaries, and bilingual campaign hashtags.	Norwegian FA (*@herrelandslaget*) cockpit-view reel (July 13, 2026); JFA, FMF, and FRMF multilingual TikTok/Instagram campaigns (June–July 2026).	Bypasses traditional broadcast gatekeepers to curate self-authored national narratives for global youth audiences.

Source: Authors' Critical Discourse Analysis of the 84-unit research corpus (2026).

A comparative reading across Table 2 reveals that participating nations do not deploy these six symbolic repertoires uniformly; rather, their communicative choices are structured by their **geopolitical standing, domestic institutional resources, and historical identity narratives** (Aziz & Andriana, 2025; Fairclough, 2013). High-income European welfare states such as Norway, France, and Italy combined institutionalized state ceremony (Category 1 and Category 4) with sleek federation digital storytelling (Category 6) to project order, technological modernity, and democratic warmth. By contrast, nations with large transnational diasporas in North America and Europe—most notably Mexico, Colombia, Morocco, Argentina, and Türkiye—relied heavily on bottom-up public solidarity (Category 2) and cultural heritage performances (Category 3) to claim visible spatial presence in host cities. Meanwhile, Japan and Oceanian/North American participants leveraged civic norm enactment (Category 5) as a low-cost, high-credibility moral signifier, whereas Iran navigated acute geopolitical constraints where operational security decisions (Category 1) and official state send-offs (Category 4) were inextricably tied to narratives of national sovereignty.

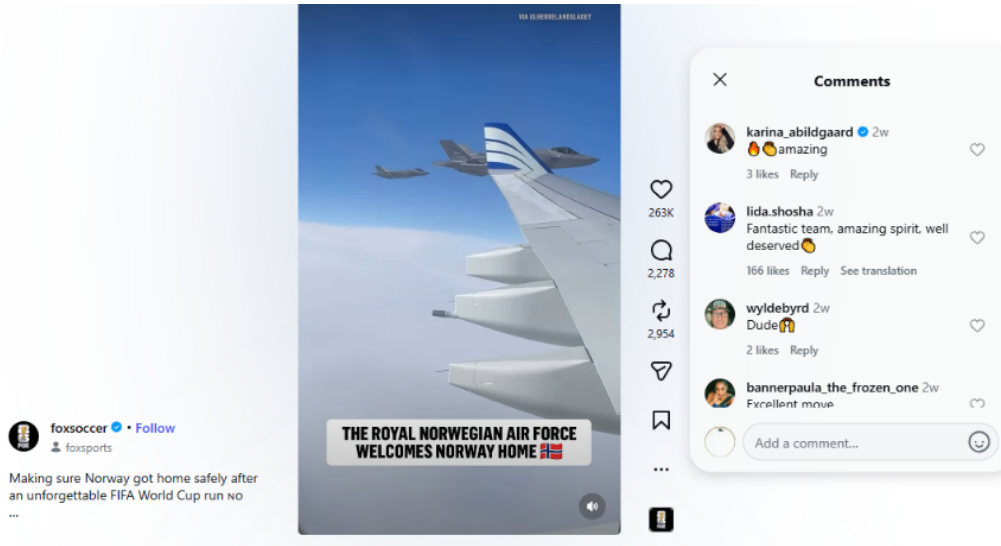
State Apparatus and Security Symbols as Discursive Negotiations of National Capacity

The first category illustrates how state defense and security institutions—traditionally conceptualized in international relations as instruments of *hard power*—are discursively re-signified within the sporting arena. The most globally visible case occurred on **Monday, July 13, 2026**, when

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the Norwegian national team returned home following their historic run at the 2026 FIFA World Cup. As the team's charter aircraft crossed into Norwegian airspace, two Royal Norwegian Air Force (*Luftforsvaret*) F-35 stealth fighter jets flew in tight wingtip formation alongside the passenger plane, with one pilot visibly waving and holding up a miniature Norwegian flag inside the cockpit (JFeed, 2026; Supercar Blondie, 2026). Applying Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model reveals how this operational flight became a global soft power text. At the **textual level**, the footage—initially captured by players and staff from the cabin windows and shared via *@herrelandslaget*—juxtaposes advanced fifth-generation military aviation with intimate, humanizing gestures (the pilot's wave and small flag) and the jubilant reactions of players such as Erling Haaland. At the **discursive practice level**, North American broadcaster Fox Soccer (*@foxsoccer*) repackaged the footage with the bold overlay text *"THE ROYAL NORWEGIAN AIR FORCE WELCOMES NORWAY HOME"* and the caption *"Making sure Norway got home safely after an unforgettable FIFA World Cup run"*, generating over 263,000 likes, 2,278 comments, and 2,954 shares (Figure 1). Crucial to rigorous discourse analysis is chronological precision: although several secondary social media reposts misconstrued the clip as a pre-tournament send-off, triangulation confirms it was a post-campaign homecoming tribute preceding celebrations in Oslo. At the **social practice level**, the spectacle discursively softens military hardware through the frame of national gratitude, blending NATO-aligned technological sophistication with egalitarian Nordic civic pride.

Figure 1. Mediated Representation of State Apparatus Symbolism: Royal Norwegian Air Force F-35 Fighter Jets Escorting the Norwegian National Team Charter Flight Home (July 13, 2026)



Source: Fox Soccer [@foxsoccer] via @herrelandslaget (July 2026).

A more routine yet institutionally significant variant of state apparatus symbolism was enacted by France and Italy through synchronized motorcycle police escorts accompanying their team buses during domestic departures and official arrivals. While lacking the dramatic spectacle of supersonic fighter jets, these ceremonial motorcades textually signify state endorsement, administrative precision, and public order, reinforcing the republican convention that national football squads function as diplomatic emissaries of the state.

By contrast, the case of **Iran (*Team Melli*)** demonstrates that security practices surrounding participating teams cannot be uncritically equated with voluntary nation-branding strategies. Ahead of the tournament, Iran was originally scheduled to base its training camp at the Kino Sports Complex in Tucson, Arizona. However, following heightened military and diplomatic hostilities involving the United States, Israel, and Iran in early 2026, combined with stringent U.S. entry visa restrictions on Iranian federation personnel, the FFIRI petitioned FIFA and relocated its training headquarters across the border to **Tijuana, Mexico** (Centro Xoloitzcuintle), commuting under heavily armed Mexican security cordons to play Group G fixtures in Los Angeles and Seattle (Al Jazeera, 2026; CBS News, 2026;

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Goal, 2026; The Guardian, 2026). From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this relocation was fundamentally a **reactive operational security and logistical measure** dictated by geopolitical asymmetry rather than a pre-planned soft power campaign. Yet, at the level of **discursive practice**, the event became a site of intense ideological contestation: Western media outlets such as *The Guardian* (2026) and *CBS News* (2026) framed the masked Mexican guards, armored vehicles, and post-match departure orders through a discourse of *securitization and geopolitical isolation*, whereas Iranian domestic commentary and official FFIRI statements reframed the delegation's cross-border commute as an act of *sovereign perseverance and athletic dignity under external pressure*. Thus, Fairclough's (2013) framework exposes how identical security arrangements generate divergent ideological meanings depending on the geopolitical position of the mediating institution.

Public and Diaspora Solidarity Rituals as Mediated Collective Identity

The second category shifts the locus of symbolic production from state institutions to grassroots citizens and transnational diaspora communities. Throughout June and July 2026, supporters of Türkiye, Argentina, Morocco, Croatia, Colombia, and Mexico staged large-scale vehicle convoys, coordinated fan marches, and public square gatherings both in their home countries and across North American host cities. At the **textual level**, these performances relied on high-density visual and acoustic repetition: columns of automobiles draped in Turkish crimson-and-white crescent flags, Argentine *albiceleste* banners, Croatian red-and-white checkerboard (*šahovnica*) motifs, and collective chanting of national anthems (Lo, 2023). At the **discursive practice level**, amateur smartphone videos recorded from highway overpasses and stadium boulevards were aggregated by sports media accounts and diaspora pages, transforming localized traffic processions into viral spectacles of national devotion.

Crucially, at the **social practice level**, these public solidarity rituals do not carry a single homogeneous meaning across nations, nor do they automatically translate into international soft power without media re-contextualization. For **Mexico and Colombia**, massive fan marches in Los Angeles, Houston, and Toronto operated within the socio-political context of Latin American migrant visibility in North America, asserting cultural belonging and demographic presence within U.S. urban spaces. For **Morocco**, supporter parades mobilized postcolonial pan-Arab and pan-African solidarity—building on the symbolic legacy of their 2022 semifinal run—while for **Türkiye**, synchronized red-car convoys across European and Anatolian cities enacted a deeply entrenched domestic political culture of visible patriotic mobilization. While international broadcasters frequently framed these gatherings as vibrant evidence of 'passion' and 'social cohesion,' occasional host-city media coverage of traffic disruptions reminds us that grassroots solidarity only generates positive soft power potential when framed by international media as festive, inclusive, and non-threatening.

Cultural Heritage Representation as Symbolic Public Diplomacy

The third category encompasses the deliberate curation of national cultural heritage—music, folklore, traditional dress, and gastronomy—within tournament fan zones and host-city precincts. During the 2026 tournament, **Mexico** leveraged its co-host cultural apparatus to stage regional *mariachi*, indigenous Wixárika art exhibitions, and culinary pavilions around Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey; **Brazil** and **Colombia** featured percussive *samba* and *cumbia* street ensembles; **Morocco** showcased Andalusian-Amazigh hospitality tents; and **Japan** and **South Korea** integrated traditional aesthetic motifs (*origami*, *hanbok*, and K-pop fan choreographies) into supporter zones. At the **textual dimension**, these practices employ sensory, non-verbal signifiers—rhythm, color, costume, and taste—that lower linguistic barriers for foreign audiences.

At the **discursive practice dimension**, cultural representations were co-produced by national tourism ministries, embassies, and diaspora cultural associations, and subsequently circulated by lifestyle journalists and travel influencers covering the World Cup. From the perspective of Nye's (2004, 2023) soft power framework, cultural resources hold high *potential attractiveness* because they

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depoliticize national presence, inviting international audiences to experience the nation through aesthetic pleasure rather than state ideology. However, Fairclough's (1995) critical lens also highlights the **social practice of selective cultural commodification**: states and tourism boards strategically foreground harmonious, photogenic, and export-friendly folkloric elements while bracketing out domestic socio-economic inequalities. Consequently, while cultural showcases during the 2026 World Cup demonstrably expanded the global visibility of participating nations' cultural brands, their contribution must be understood as cultivating *symbolic familiarity and tourism appeal* rather than proving deep attitudinal shifts among foreign publics.

Executive Political Leadership as State Representation

Whereas Category 1 involves the operational security and military apparatus of the state, the fourth category—**Executive Political Leadership Symbols**—is analytically distinct in focusing on the personal and ceremonial involvement of heads of state, monarchs, and cabinet ministers. Empirical instances in the 2026 corpus include the official state send-off ceremony for Iran's *Team Melli* in Tehran on May 14, 2026 attended by senior executive officials (Al Jazeera, 2026), royal and prime-ministerial greetings for the Norwegian squad in Oslo on July 13, 2026 (JFeed, 2026), and high-profile diplomatic attendance and congratulatory communiqués by political leaders in Türkiye, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Argentina (Vila-Lopez et al., 2024).

At the **textual and visual level**, executive leadership symbolism is constructed through highly choreographed protocol imagery: handshakes between presidents or monarchs and team captains, presentation of the national flag as a sacred trust, and official photographs in presidential palaces or VIP stadium suites. At the **discursive practice level**, these images are produced by state protocol offices and distributed simultaneously through official government press agencies and national broadcasters. At the **social practice level**, executive involvement performs a dual ideological function: domestically, political leaders seek to appropriate the cross-partisan emotional popularity of the national football team to bolster their own internal political legitimacy; internationally, VIP stadium presence functions as *summit sports diplomacy*, signaling state commitment and facilitating informal bilateral visibility alongside FIFA and host-nation dignitaries.

National Values and Civic Identity Enactment

The fifth category captures how everyday civic behaviors and normative commitments enacted by supporters and delegations are discursively elevated into representations of national character. The paradigmatic case in the 2026 corpus is **Japan**: across multiple group-stage and knockout fixtures, Japanese supporters remained in the stands after the final whistle equipped with blue biodegradable trash bags to collect litter, while the Japanese national team left spotless locker rooms accompanied by handwritten thank-you notes and *origami* cranes in both English and Spanish. Parallel normative representations were observed among **Canada, Australia, and New Zealand**, whose delegations and supporter groups foregrounded campaigns around gender inclusivity, indigenous land acknowledgments, and reciprocal sportsmanship toward opposing fans (Babbitt, 2023).

Examined through Fairclough's (1992, 2013) framework, the soft power potency of civic value enactment lies in its **apparent non-instrumentality**. Textually, footage of Japanese fans quietly cleaning stadium rows contains no state slogans or diplomatic rhetoric. Yet, at the **discursive practice level**, international broadcasters, FIFA's official social media channels, and host-city journalists repeatedly framed these acts through moralizing headlines (*"The World's Best Guests"*, *"A Lesson in Civic Respect"*), contrasting them with stereotypical football hooliganism. At the **social practice level**, domestic cultural norms of communal responsibility (*souji* and *omotenashi* in Japan, or multicultural civic egalitarianism in Canada and New Zealand) are discursively essentialized by global media into national moral virtues. Because these behaviors are enacted by ordinary citizens rather than state propagandists, they achieve high discursive credibility in the global public sphere, generating normative attractiveness precisely by avoiding overt political messaging.

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Strategic Digital Storytelling and National Image Construction

The sixth category—**Strategic Federation Digital Storytelling**—focuses specifically on original multimodal campaigns produced by the media departments of national football associations to construct self-authored national narratives. Rather than relying solely on international television broadcasters to frame their delegations, participating federations in 2026 operated as agile digital media houses on Instagram Reels, TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and X. For example, the Norwegian Football Federation (*@herrelandslaget*) produced first-person vertical reels from inside the team plane during the July 13, 2026 F-35 escort that juxtaposed player wonder with cockpit footage (Fox Soccer, 2026); the Mexican (*FMF*), Moroccan (*FRMF*), and Japanese (*JFA*) federations released cinematic bilingual mini-documentaries linking players' hometown roots and diaspora journeys to their World Cup participation.

At the **textual level**, federation storytelling employs fast-paced vertical editing, intimate locker-room audio, bilingual English-native subtitles, and identity hashtags (such as *#SterkereSammen*, *#DimaMaghrib*, and *#SAMURAIBLUE*). At the **discursive practice level**, this represents a structural shift in international communication: by packaging emotionally resonant, platform-native content, national federations successfully induced global sports aggregators (such as Fox Soccer, Bleacher Report, and 433) to repost their narratives verbatim. At the **social practice level**, strategic digital storytelling enables smaller or middle-power nations to partially bypass traditional Western media gatekeeping, exercising *discursive agency* over how their national identity and athletic journey are presented to global youth audiences.

Analytical Synthesis: Mechanisms of Soft Power Contestation in the Global Sporting Arena

Synthesizing the six categories through Fairclough's (1995, 2013) concept of the *order of discourse* reveals how the 2026 FIFA World Cup functioned as an arena of **soft power contestation**. In this arena, contestation does not take the form of coercive zero-sum conflict; instead, it operates as a **competition for scarce global attention, symbolic legitimacy, and moral authority** through three interrelated discursive mechanisms. First is the **conversion of hard-power and institutional capital into symbolic prestige**, exemplified by Norway's transformation of F-35 fighter jets into a celebratory homecoming tribute and executive leaders' ceremonial endorsements (Categories 1 and 4). Second is the **mobilization of affective and cultural authenticity from below**, whereby diaspora convoys, cultural festivals, and Japanese fans' stadium cleaning (Categories 2, 3, and 5) generate human-centric appeal that state bureaucracy alone cannot manufacture. Third is **algorithmic and journalistic co-amplification** (Category 6), through which federation digital storytelling feeds transnational sports networks to scale national symbols globally.

Crucially, this synthesis also demonstrates that participating nations do not compete on an equal discursive playing field. As the contrast between Norway's celebrated F-35 escort and Iran's heavily securitized Tijuana training camp relocation illustrates, international media framing is deeply conditioned by pre-existing geopolitical alignments: military fighter jets deployed by a European democracy are discursively celebrated by Western sports outlets as heartwarming national pride (Fox Soccer, 2026), whereas armed security surrounding an Iranian delegation is framed through crisis and geopolitical tension (The Guardian, 2026). Thus, soft power projection at the FIFA World Cup is never a unilateral act of national self-presentation, but a contested discursive negotiation between national symbol producers, international media gatekeepers, and global geopolitical structures.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that participating nations at the 2026 FIFA World Cup actively utilized the tournament's transnational communicative space to project national identity and contest soft power potential through six distinct yet interconnected forms of symbolic communication: (1) state apparatus and security symbols, (2) public and diaspora solidarity rituals, (3) cultural heritage representations,

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(4) executive political leadership endorsements, (5) national values and civic character enactments, and (6) strategic federation digital storytelling. Rather than functioning in isolation, these six forms interact across two primary axes of meaning production: a *top-down institutional axis* (mobilizing military/police protocols, executive diplomacy, and official federation media to project state capacity and sovereignty) and a *bottom-up civic-cultural axis* (mobilizing diaspora solidarity, cultural folklore, and everyday civic ethics to cultivate organic cultural and moral appeal).

Across Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2013) three analytical dimensions, the findings demonstrate that symbolic practices in international sport do not automatically generate soft power; rather, their communicative meaning is forged through discursive mediation and conditioned by macro-level geopolitical power relations. While consensual civic and cultural practices (such as post-match stadium cleaning or cultural festivals) and celebratory state rituals (such as post-tournament homecoming escorts) are readily amplified by global media as markers of national attractiveness, security-driven measures under geopolitical strain undergo intense ideological reframing between domestic resilience narratives and international securitization discourses.

The primary theoretical contribution of this research lies in decentering the host-nation paradigm in sports diplomacy and soft power studies. Whereas prior scholarship has predominantly conceptualized mega-sporting events as instruments of host-state branding or FIFA institutional governance, this study establishes a **multi-actor participating-state framework**, demonstrating how non-host delegations and their publics co-produce the symbolic order of the tournament. Practically, the findings suggest that national sports federations and public diplomacy practitioners can maximize positive international visibility by aligning authentic civic behaviors and cultural heritage with agile, multilingual digital storytelling.

Finally, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study relied on a purposive corpus of 84 documentary, journalistic, and social media units across 14 participating nations between May and July 2026, which does not capture the entirety of the 48-nation tournament. Second, as an interpretive Critical Discourse Analysis of texts and media practices, this research examines the *production, framing, and potential attractiveness* of national symbols, and cannot empirically prove causal changes in foreign public attitudes or actual soft power conversion without audience reception data. Future research should therefore combine critical discourse analysis with cross-national audience reception surveys, experimental exposure designs, and large-scale computational sentiment analysis to measure how international audiences decode and evaluate the symbolic projections of participating nations.

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