

From the Couch to the Global Stage: Social Media, Soft Power, and International Relations in the FIFA World Cup 2026

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Abstract: *The FIFA World Cup has evolved from a mere sporting competition into a global platform where culture, politics, identity, and diplomacy intersect. The rise of social media has further transformed football into a digital arena where nations, athletes, organisations, and ordinary citizens help shape international narratives. This article explores the relationship between social media, international relations, and the FIFA World Cup 2026 by examining football as an instrument of soft power and digital diplomacy. Beginning with a personal reflection on the changing social significance of football, the article argues that the sport has become an important vehicle for nations to project identity, influence global perceptions, and engage in international communication. The World Cup 2026, hosted jointly by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, offers a unique opportunity to examine how football operates within contemporary geopolitics, particularly through the expanding influence of social media.*

Keywords: Football Diplomacy, Social Media, International Relations, Soft Power, FIFA World Cup 2026, Digital Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy

1. Introduction

A Personal Journey into the World of Football

I have never been a big fan of football. My mother and my sister were the true enthusiasts. They would stay awake late into the night, wearing the jerseys of the teams they supported, completely absorbed by every movement on the field. Most of the time, their loyalty belonged to Argentina, France, and Brazil. Yet, because of the unavoidable fear of missing out, I would often find myself sleeping beside them on the couch, pretending to follow the game while they watched with complete concentration and emotional investment.

The names that dominated conversations during those years were Maradona, Zidane, Roberto Baggio, and Ronaldo of Brazil. They were not merely football players; they represented national pride, cultural identity, and global admiration. Interestingly, I too had my brief moment of football obsession when I developed a major crush on an Argentine goalkeeper- Sergio Goycochea. Since then, I have always found myself supporting Argentina, even though my connection with football gradually faded over time.

However, football had a way of returning to everyday life. With the arrival of satellite television, cable networks, and later social media, football became impossible to ignore. The sport moved from stadiums into living rooms, mobile phones, and digital spaces. League competitions, international tournaments, and endless football content transformed the sport into a permanent feature of global entertainment.

Television channels dedicated entirely to football created a new viewing culture. Players were no longer just athletes; they became global celebrities. Footballers emerged as cultural icons comparable to actors and musicians. David Beckham, Neymar, Cristiano Ronaldo, Jude Bellingham, Lamine Yamal, Nakamura Keito and Mbappe became global

personalities whose influence extended far beyond the football field.

What fascinated me was not only the sport itself but also the emotional power it held. Millions of people across different cultures, languages, and political systems found a common identity through football. As a teacher of International Relations, I gradually came to ask an important question: *How does a sport become a force in global politics?*

Football and the Study of International Relations

As a scholar and teacher of International Relations, my primary interest has always been the political affairs of nations—the struggle for power, influence, and security among states. International politics has traditionally been understood through concepts of military capability, economic strength, and political authority.

Power has often been categorised into two broad forms: hard power and soft power.

Hard power is the ability of states to influence others through military strength, economic pressure, or coercion. Historically, powerful nations have used hard power to expand their influence, dominate weaker states, and advance strategic interests. However, history shows that hard power alone does not necessarily create stability or lasting peace. Military dominance may achieve immediate objectives, but it often sparks resistance, conflict, and division.

Soft power, a concept developed by Joseph Nye, offers a different understanding of influence. Rather than forcing others to follow, it attracts and persuades through culture, values, and ideas. In contemporary global politics, culture has become an increasingly important source of international influence (Nye, 2011).

South Korea offers a remarkable example of successful soft power projection. Through K-pop, K-dramas, Korean cuisine, fashion, and skincare, South Korea has expanded its global influence without relying on traditional forms of power. Similarly, football has become one of the most powerful cultural tools for nations to communicate their identity and values.

Football as Soft Power and Sports Diplomacy

Football is often described as the world's most popular sport, but its importance extends beyond entertainment. It has become a form of cultural diplomacy where nations present themselves to global audiences.

The FIFA World Cup provides countries with opportunities to strengthen national identity; promote cultural heritage; attract tourism and investment; improve international reputation; and create diplomatic connections.

A nation's football success can influence how it is perceived globally. Argentina's World Cup victories, Brazil's football tradition, France's multicultural team identity, and Germany's sporting organisation have all contributed to international images associated with these countries.

Football players themselves have become informal diplomats. Their personal stories, backgrounds, and public activities influence how people view their countries. Athletes often represent values such as diversity, perseverance, and unity, making them powerful symbols of national and global identity. Sports diplomacy increasingly recognises athletes and sporting institutions as important non-state actors in international communication (Murray, 2018).

Social Media: The New Stadium of Global Diplomacy

The transformation of football cannot be understood without examining the role of social media. Digital platforms have reshaped how people experience the World Cup. The stadium is no longer the only place where football exists; the digital world has become an equally important arena.

Platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok, and YouTube enable millions of people to join global football conversations in real time. A goal, celebration, controversy, or political statement can spark a worldwide discussion within minutes.

Social media has transformed supporters from passive viewers into active participants. Fans create content, debate issues, support causes, and influence global narratives. Digital engagement has therefore expanded football's political significance and created new forms of participation in global affairs (Cull, 2019).

Governments and organisations also use social media as a tool for public diplomacy. Through carefully designed digital campaigns, countries promote their culture, hospitality, and national image. The World Cup has therefore become not only a sporting event but also a communication platform where nations compete for global attention.

FIFA World Cup 2026: Football, Geopolitics, and Digital Diplomacy

The FIFA World Cup 2026 represents a significant moment in the history of global football. Hosted jointly by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, it will be the first World Cup organised across three countries and the first tournament featuring 48 teams.

The choice of hosts presents an interesting political and cultural dimension. The United States, despite being one of the most influential nations in global affairs, has historically not shared the same football culture as many parts of Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Football has often occupied a secondary position compared to American sports such as American football, basketball, and baseball.

Yet this makes World Cup 2026 particularly fascinating. The United States embodies both global power and cultural diversity. It is a country significantly shaped by immigration, where communities from around the world maintain strong ties to their cultural origins. Football offers a unique space where these diverse identities can meet.

The tournament offers the United States an opportunity to engage with the world through culture rather than through traditional forms of power. Rather than military influence or economic dominance, football offers a different form of global engagement- one grounded in shared experiences and emotional connections.

Canada and Mexico also bring unique dimensions to the tournament. Together, the three host nations demonstrate how sports can encourage regional cooperation and create platforms for cultural exchange.

However, the *Iran issue* became one of the most significant geopolitical controversies surrounding the *2026 FIFA World Cup*, highlighting the tension between international sport and global politics.

Iran–United States Tensions

Relations between Iran and the United States were already strained before the tournament, and renewed military confrontation in 2026 further complicated Iran's participation. Since the United States hosted most of the World Cup matches, concerns emerged over whether Iranian players, officials, media personnel, and supporters would be able to enter the country.

Although FIFA maintained that all qualified teams had the right to participate, the United States imposed strict travel conditions on the Iranian delegation. Iran's team was required to base itself in **Tijuana, Mexico**, rather than remain in the United States between matches. Players initially received permission to enter the U.S. only shortly before each match and had to leave immediately afterwards. Several Iranian football federation officials and support staff were denied visas. Many Iranian supporters faced significant difficulties obtaining entry to attend matches in the United States.

FIFA's Diplomatic Challenge

The situation placed FIFA in a difficult position. As an organisation committed to political neutrality and equal

treatment of all member associations, FIFA had to balance the sovereign right of host governments to control immigration and security with the sporting principle that all qualified teams should compete under comparable conditions. FIFA ultimately allowed Iran to participate, but logistical compromises, such as basing the team in Mexico, illustrated the limits of FIFA's influence over state policies.

Sport as a Tool of Political Messaging

The tournament also became a platform for political rhetoric. Iranian leaders publicly criticised the United States, portraying the travel restrictions as evidence of unequal treatment and linking the World Cup to broader U.S.–Iran political tensions. This demonstrated how mega-sporting events can become arenas for diplomatic messaging and symbolic competition beyond the football field.

Highlights and Popular Trends of the FIFA World Cup 2026

The FIFA World Cup 2026 is expected to be one of the most transformative tournaments in football history. Beyond the excitement of the matches, it will reshape how football is experienced through technology, social media, international cooperation, and fan participation. The tournament reflects not only the evolution of the sport but also broader trends in globalisation and digital communication.

1) The First-Ever Three-Nation World Cup

For the first time in FIFA history, the tournament will be jointly hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. This unprecedented arrangement symbolises regional cooperation and shared responsibility among North American nations. It also highlights football's ability to transcend political borders, uniting countries with diverse cultures, languages, and sporting traditions in a single global event.

2) Expansion to 48 Teams

The 2026 World Cup marks the expansion from 32 to 48 participating nations, making it the largest tournament ever organised. This change offers opportunities for countries that previously struggled to qualify, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

The expanded format is expected to: increase global representation, strengthen football development in emerging nations, create more competitive diversity, attract larger global audiences. For many smaller footballing nations, qualification itself becomes a significant diplomatic and cultural achievement.

3) Football Meets the Digital Generation

Unlike previous tournaments, World Cup 2026 will be experienced simultaneously in stadiums and across digital platforms. Social media has become an extension of the football field. Fans did not simply watch matches—they actively participated by creating memes and short videos, posting live reactions, joining hashtag campaigns, participating in online predictions and fantasy leagues, and producing fan-generated content. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, and emerging AI-powered media will shape public discourse throughout the tournament.

4) AI and Data Analytics

Artificial Intelligence is expected to play a larger role than ever before. Possible applications include: AI-powered match analysis, real-time player performance statistics, predictive analytics, multilingual commentary and automatic translation, and personalised fan experiences through streaming platforms. Broadcasters and football clubs increasingly rely on AI to enhance performance analysis and viewer engagement.

5) Social Media Influencers as Football Ambassadors

Football content is no longer produced only by journalists and television broadcasters. Digital creators, influencers, podcasters, and former players have become major voices shaping public opinion. Many fans now receive football news through YouTube channels, TikTok creators, Instagram reels, podcasts, and fan communities on Reddit and Discord. The influence of traditional sports journalism is increasingly shared with digital communities.

6) Nation Branding and Sports Diplomacy

Host countries are expected to use the World Cup to promote:

- a) tourism;
- b) cultural diversity;
- c) technological innovation;
- d) hospitality;
- e) investment opportunities.

The tournament becomes a form of public diplomacy, allowing countries to project positive national images to billions of viewers worldwide.

The United States, Canada, and Mexico each have the opportunity to showcase distinct cultural identities while emphasising regional cooperation.

7) The Rise of Football Fashion

Football has increasingly become part of global popular culture. During World Cup 2026, trends are likely to include:

- a) Retro jerseys;
- b) Vintage football fashion;
- c) Limited-edition collaborations between sports brands and fashion designers;
- d) Streetwear inspired by national teams;
- e) Customised jerseys featuring local culture.

Football shirts are now worn as fashion statements rather than only sports apparel.

8) Fan Tourism

The World Cup is expected to generate one of the largest waves of international tourism in sporting history. Fans are increasingly planning complete travel experiences that combine:

- a) Football matches;
- b) Local cuisine;
- c) Music festivals;
- d) Sightseeing;
- e) Cultural heritage tours.

The three host countries offer diverse experiences—from Mexico's rich cultural traditions to Canada's natural landscapes and the United States' iconic cities.

9) Sustainability and Green Initiatives

Environmental sustainability has become an important expectation for mega sporting events. World Cup 2026 is expected to emphasise:

- Public transportation;
- Renewable energy in stadium operations;
- Waste reduction;
- Carbon footprint management;
- Environmentally responsible event planning.

These efforts reflect growing public awareness of climate change and sustainable development.

10) Football as a Platform for Social Issues

Major tournaments increasingly become platforms for discussions on:

- Racial equality;
- Gender inclusion;
- Migrant communities;
- Mental health;
- Human rights;
- Anti-discrimination campaigns.

Players, teams, and supporters often use social media to raise awareness about global issues, making football a catalyst for broader social conversations.

11) The Globalisation of Football Fandom

Perhaps the most remarkable trend is that football fandom has become increasingly transnational. Supporters no longer identify solely with their national teams; many follow clubs, players, and football cultures from around the world. A teenager in Mizoram may support Argentina because of Lionel Messi, a family in Japan may cheer for Brazil, and an American fan may passionately follow Morocco or Croatia. Social media has accelerated these cross-cultural connections, creating global fan communities that transcend geography and nationality.

12) The Search for a New Global Icon

The legacies of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo continue to shape the narrative around World Cup 2026. At the same time, the tournament is expected to spotlight emerging stars such as Jude Bellingham, Lamine Yamal, Kylian Mbappé, and Erling Haaland, whose performances and online presence will likely dominate global conversations.

Social Media and Nation Branding during World Cup 2026

The digital dimension of World Cup 2026 will be central to how nations present themselves internationally. Through social media, host countries can promote cultural diversity, tourism opportunities, technological innovation, multicultural identities, and international cooperation.

Nation branding through major sporting events allows countries to construct favourable international identities and strengthen their soft power resources (Grix & Lee, 2013). The tournament will also provide opportunities for diaspora communities to reconnect with their countries of origin.

A supporter living thousands of miles away can participate digitally in national celebrations, discussions, and cultural

expressions. This demonstrates how social media has created new forms of belonging, where identity is no longer limited by geography but maintained through digital communities (Cull, 2019).

Challenges of Digital Football Diplomacy

While social media has strengthened global engagement, it also creates challenges.

Misinformation and Digital Manipulation: The speed of online communication allows inaccurate information to spread rapidly. During major sporting events, false narratives about teams, players, and countries can influence public opinion.

Nationalism and Online Conflict: Football can unite people, but it can also intensify national rivalries. Online spaces sometimes transform sporting competition into political hostility, discrimination, or hate speech.

Commercialisation of Digital Spaces: The increasing commercialisation of football content raises questions about whether digital engagement is driven by cultural connection or corporate interests.

Why These Trends Matter for International Relations

The FIFA World Cup 2026 demonstrates that football is no longer merely a sporting contest. It has become a global arena where **soft power, digital diplomacy, nation branding, cultural exchange, and social media converge**. Every viral post, fan campaign, player interview, and cultural celebration helps shape international perceptions. In this sense, the tournament offers a compelling case study of how contemporary international relations are increasingly influenced not only by governments and formal diplomacy but also by athletes, digital platforms, and millions of connected citizens around the world.

2. Conclusion: Beyond the Beautiful Game

My journey with football began not through passion but through proximity, sleeping on a couch beside family members who were emotionally invested in every match. Over time, however, I began to recognise that football represented something much larger than a game.

Football is a language spoken across borders. It connects people who may differ in nationality, culture, religion, and political beliefs. In today's world, where traditional power politics often creates divisions, football offers an alternative form of influence rooted in attraction and connection.

The FIFA World Cup 2026 demonstrates how sports, social media, and international relations have become deeply interconnected. The tournament will not only crown a football champion; it will also shape narratives about nations, cultures, and global relationships.

In the age of digital diplomacy, the football field has expanded beyond the stadium. It now lives on screens, social networks, and in global conversations. The World Cup has become a stage where countries compete not only for victory but also for recognition, admiration, and influence.

Football, once viewed simply as a sport, has become a powerful instrument of international relations- and social media has become its global voice.

‘It’s coming Home!’

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