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# Involvement with the FIFA Men's World Cup 2022 and Intentions to Visit Qatar: A Study with Indian Football Fans

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**Abstract**

The general objective of the study was to explore and describe the relationships between fans' involvement with the 2022 Men's FIFA World Cup, their perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination and their intentions to visit in the future. The study focuses on India as a potential outbound tourism market because of its size and strategic importance for tourism in Qatar. We drew on brand knowledge and signalling theory to frame the relationship between involvement, destination image and intentions to visit Qatar after the World Cup. We collected data from a large sample of Indian football fans ($n = 301$) through an online survey and tested a structural equation model. Results showed that involvement with the World Cup could positively affect perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination based on its attributes (attractions, hospitality) and benefits. However, the attributes of Qatar were not enough to inform attitudes towards future visits to the country. Findings supported a direct impact of involvement on intentions to visit rather than an indirect impact through destination image. This has direct theoretical implications for future studies and practical implications for Qatar and similar countries trying to capitalise on sport mega-events to increase international tourism.

**Keywords:** country image; destination image; legacy; sport mega-event; sport tourism

## 1. Introduction

Mega sport-events are expected to provide an opportunity for host countries to showcase themselves as tourism destinations to international audiences. Such events provide immediate entertainment opportunities for fans who love sport, but they also portray a message about a country's culture, infrastructure and hospitality which might help to enhance a country's reputation abroad. Along with the Olympic Games, the FIFA Men's World Cup (hereinafter World Cup) is the most powerful of these events, attracting thousands of visitors and billions of viewers from all parts of the world (FIFA, 2022). The 2022 World Cup in Qatar was historic as the first one in the Middle East. For Qatar, this was more than a football tournament; it represented an opportunity to align with the National Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy, and to position the country as a modern tourism destination (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008; Scharfenort, 2012).

The event garnered global attention and disputably created an opportunity for Qatar to promote itself as an international tourism destination. Beyond investing heavily in stadiums, the country invested substantially in urban transformation, transportation and hospitality services in the hope of becoming the next tourism hub in the Middle East (Henderson, 2014). Some previous research suggests that the event has had a positive impact on the image of the country as a tourism destination (Acheampong et al., 2024). Other studies have

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also explored the impacts of the World Cup and other sport mega-events on the destination image of host sites (Gibson et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2005; Rocha & Fink, 2017). However, the literature has not provided strong evidence of post-event impacts on Qatari tourism. To fill this gap and explain the tourism impacts in Qatar, we designed this study with two key characteristics. First, we focused on testing the relationship between the involvement of prospective tourists with the 2022 World Cup, their perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination and intentions to visit the country *after* the event. Testing the relationship among these variables is fundamental to claim any impact of the World Cup on Qatari tourism. Second, we defined a clear international outbound market with potential to have an impact on tourism in Qatar because not all markets have the size and potential to have a significant impact on it.

The relationship between involvement with the World Cup and intentions to visit the country is supported by signalling theory (Spence, 1974), indicating that the event can send quality signals to potential tourists. Image branding framework (Keller, 1993) suggests that this relationship should be mediated by specific characteristics of the host as a tourism destination. In the hosting literature, both theoretical frameworks appear in studies exploring why states pursue mega-events to improve tourism attraction (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Rocha & Fink, 2017). In the current study, we tested whether one, both, or neither contributes to explaining the relationship among these three variables: involvement with the World Cup, destination image, and intentions to visit Qatar after the event. We explore further the role of signalling theory and image branding framework in the literature review.

To define a clear international market with potential to have an impact on tourism in Qatar, we focused on India, the most populated country in the world (with about 1.47 billion people) and with an increased potential for outbound international tourists. India's outbound tourism expenditure reached US$ 32.7 million in 2025, continuing a long trend of growth, which has been driven by rising incomes and other socioeconomic factors (Paramasivam & Ishwarbharath, 2026). As India's large middle class gets richer, outbound trips are expected to increase fivefold by 2040 (ITB Berlin, 2025). A recent tourism report showed that Indians are mostly going to UAE, Thailand, and Southeast Asia for short tourism trips (Ministry of Tourism India, 2025) but have not elected Qatar as one of their preferred tourism destinations in the region yet. Therefore, India represents the perfect scenario to test the impact of the World Cup on intentions of short-haul travellers.

The aim of this research is to analyse the importance of the 2022 World Cup in boosting tourism in Qatar, specifically among Indian football fans. The focus on football fans reflects the likelihood that they are the group that has engaged the most with the World Cup and, consequently, the most exposed to messages about the host country. The general objective of the study was to explore and describe the relationships between fans' involvement with the 2022 Men's FIFA World Cup, their perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination and intentions of future visits. The research allows us to answer three research questions.

RQ1. Can involvement with the 2022 World Cup affect perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination among Indian football fans?

RQ2. Can perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination explain intentions to visit the country after the event?

RQ3. Can involvement with the 2022 World Cup explain intentions to visit Qatar after the event?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Involvement with Sport Events and Destination Image*

Beaton et al. (2011) define sport involvement as an individual's motivational state toward a sport object that is reflected in the perceived importance and personal relevance

of the object. They proposed that involvement can be behavioural or attitudinal. While the former can be directly measured, for example based on the number of hours invested in your preferred sport, to measure the latter we need to rely on perceptions of individuals about their cognitive and emotional engagement with the sport object (Beaton et al., 2011). Based on this, we define sport event involvement as the extent to which a sport event is perceived as personally meaningful to an individual, resulting in attitudinal and behavioural engagement with the event.

Most of the previous studies have focused on behavioural involvement with sport events either through direct attendance (e.g., Andersson et al., 2021; Florek et al., 2008) or media (J. Kim et al., 2014; Rocha et al., 2021). Other studies have also used behavioural involvement but not relied on objective measures like matches attended or number of hours people spent online reading or talking about sport events (Neale & Funk, 2006; Taks & Rocha, 2022), preferring to use self-reported measures on how people have engaged with the events. To inform the current study, we rely on Fisher and Wakefield (1998) and other studies (Brown et al., 2016; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Taks & Rocha, 2022) to develop a simple scale to measure involvement with the sport event (i.e., the 2022 World Cup) post-event. We opted for a combination of self-reported attitudes and behaviours to attain the aim of the current study because this is a post-event study, where remembering specific indicators of behavioural involvement can be quite difficult. We followed previous studies that have measured attitudinal involvement as a unidimensional construct (Brown et al., 2016; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012).

The literature indicates that attending or engaging with a sport event can improve how fans view the host place—although the magnitude of the change depends on the event, the host, and the population being investigated (Andersson et al., 2021; Florek et al., 2008; J. Kim et al., 2014). Direct event experience often improves the host-country image among visiting fans. For example, at the 2006 FIFA World Cup, fans who attended the event reported a significant improvement in Germany's image after attendance, especially seeing it as a friendlier, less expensive, and more multicultural country (Florek et al., 2008). Investigating three different mega-event hosts (France, Russia, and Qatar), Andersson et al. (2021) found that the events can positively influence visitors' destination images when the host satisfies key visitor expectations such as cost, convenience, attractions, and climate/atmosphere. However, improving destination image alone does not guarantee increased visitation, and emerging hosts like Qatar face significant challenges in aligning their image with visitor expectations (Andersson et al., 2021).

To define impacts of involvement on image, it is important to differentiate between destination image and host-country image. Destination image refers to the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds about a specific place, focusing primarily on the place as a tourism destination (Crompton, 1979). Country image refers to the perception of a country and its people, including cognitive and affective beliefs about the country's different aspects (Wang et al., 2012). Just a few investigations have incorporated both constructs into the same study. An exception is J. Kim et al. (2014) who investigated the perceptions of Korean sport fans about China and found that hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics had led to mixed changes in China's image, both as a tourism destination and as a country. They found that the event had a more significant impact on the destination image and less on the country image. They challenge the optimistic assumptions about mega sport events and image improvement, especially for familiar short-haul markets (like South Korea-China). The justification is that travellers who live close-enough often have well-established images of the host country that are hard to change through event hosting.

From a sport tourism perspective, destination image captures more directly the experiential and place-specific associations that shape a visitor's decision-making and post-visit

evaluation (Chalip, 2006; Gibson, 1998). Gibson (1998) argues that sport tourism research should explore the destination-level attributes that influence travel behaviour, since these are the elements event organisers and destination marketing organisations can realistically leverage to convert event visibility into sustained tourism demand. Chalip (2006) adds that the strategic leveraging of sport events for destination branding operates primarily at the destination scale, using the event as a platform to reshape place-specific image rather than to alter diffuse national stereotypes. Based on empirical data, S. Kim and Morrison (2005) found that foreign tourists' images of South Korea as a tourism destination shifted significantly and positively in the aftermath of the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Gibson et al. (2008) examined perceptions of China in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and found that international audiences rated Chinese destination attributes, including cultural attractions, hospitality, and infrastructure, more favourably as a function of their awareness of and interest in the Games. Moving a step further, Rocha and Fink (2017) investigated whether the interaction between the brand images of the Olympic Games and Brazil might shape attitudes toward visiting the country after the Rio 2016 Games. Findings showed that the strategy of transferring credibility from the event to the host had not worked well and had little influence on intentions to visit the country after the event.

### 2.2. Destination Image and Intentions to Visit the Host After the Event

We framed the relationship between destination image and intentions to visit Qatar after the World Cup within Keller's (1993) branding framework. Keller's framework has been used to inform brands associated with tourism destinations (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Rocha & Fink, 2017). The framework proposes that brand-product associations depend on three dimensions: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Following previous studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chalip et al., 2003; Rocha & Fink, 2017), we define attributes of a destination based on the characteristics of attractions and hospitality of the place. Attractions are represented by characteristics like beautiful scenery, and interesting natural and cultural attractions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chalip et al., 2003). Hospitality attributes are related to perceptions about hotel/accommodation infrastructure, friendliness of locals, and personal safety (Rocha & Fink, 2017). Benefits are the personal values that visitors attach to a destination. They drive visitors' preference by fulfilling specific needs or wants (Keller, 1993). Attitudes are shaped by how strongly and favourably a visitor connects the destination brand image to specific attributes and benefits (Ajzen, 2001; Keller, 1993).

Previous research with different sport events has supported a positive relationship between destination image and intentions to visit the host of sport mega-events. For example, investigating a motor racing event in Australia, Chalip et al. (2003) found that the destination image had a significantly positive effect on intentions to visit the host destination (the Gold Coast) after the event—this applied to both short- (New Zealand) and long-haul (USA) markets. Similarly, Gibson et al. (2008) found that destination image was significantly related to international tourists' intentions to visit China within the next 5 years after the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Lee et al. (2005) reported that hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup stimulated international visitation and positively affected South Korea's destination image among those attending the event.

### 2.3. Signalling Theory

Beyond Keller's (1993) branding image framework, the current study has drawn upon signalling theory (Spence, 1974). The theory says that any business relationship is represented by two sides—producers and consumers—that have different information about each other. Tourism is an experiential product in which many aspects of service quality cannot be fully evaluated until the service is consumed (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008;

Zeithaml, 1981). Because of this characteristic of tourism, destinations (producers) know more about the services than the consumers do. This is what the literature calls information asymmetry, which supports the importance of association with a stronger brand (e.g., the World Cup) that can send signals of quality to potential consumers (Rao & Ruekert, 1994).

In this study, we want to test whether hosting the 2022 World Cup might have worked as a "quality signal" of Qatar in the minds of prospective tourists. In this context, the Qatari state and tourism authorities can be understood as the signal senders, with hosting the World Cup serving as the signal. By successfully organising a globally prominent sporting mega-event, Qatar could communicate its organisational capabilities, infrastructure quality, and hospitality to international visitors. Prospective tourists are the signal receivers, who may have limited direct experience of Qatar and therefore face uncertainty when evaluating the country as a tourism destination. The event may reduce this information asymmetry by providing a visible and internationally recognised indicator of Qatar as a tourism destination. Only a few previous studies have tested this in the context of sport events. For example, Sorrentino et al. (2020) found that event experience with the America's Cup World Series (a famous sailing event) in Southern Italy could explain intentions to revisit the host area, without considering changes in destination image. Although Brown et al. (2016) have not tested a direct effect from involvement with the sport event (London Olympics) to intentions to visit the host city (London), they have not included tourism destination image either. Rather, they explored involvement with specific Olympic sports and attachment to specific venues, which can also work as signals (without passing through destination image attributes) to inform future visits to specific sites.

Testing this alternative theoretical venue is important because previous empirical research that has tested whether hosting sport mega-events has worked to promote hosts as tourism destinations (Hahm et al., 2019; Kenyon & Bodet, 2018; Rocha & Fink, 2017) has provided mixed results. For example, Kenyon and Bodet (2018) found that attitudes towards London were negatively affected between the pre- and post-2012 Olympic Games periods, with no evidence of image transfer (co-branding) between London and the Games. Examining American perceptions before, during, and after the 2018 Winter Olympics, Hahm et al. (2019) found no significant changes either in South Korea's country image or destination image. The inconclusive findings regarding the relationship between destination image and intentions to visit represent an important gap to be filled because one of the main arguments in the literature has been that hosting events can improve destination image, which in turn can increase the chances of future visits.

Based on signalling theory and the literature review, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** *Involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup positively affects perceptions of the attractions of Qatar as a tourism destination.*

**H1b.** *Involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup positively affects perceptions of the hospitality of Qatar as a tourism destination.*

**H1c.** *Involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup positively affects perceptions of benefits of Qatar as a tourism destination.*

**H2a.** *Attractions of Qatar as a tourism destination positively affect attitudes toward visiting the country after the event.*

**H2b.** *Hospitality of Qatar as a tourism destination positively affects attitudes toward visiting the country after the event.*

**H2c.** *Benefits of Qatar as a tourism destination positively affect attitudes toward visiting the country after the event.*

**H3.** *There is a positive direct effect from involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup to attitudes toward visiting the country after the event.*

**H4.** *There is a positive indirect effect from involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup to attitudes toward visiting the country after the event through Qatar's tourism attractions, hospitality and benefits.*

### *2.4. The Context—Qatar as a Tourism Destination, India as an Outbound Tourism Hub*

The evolution of Qatar as a tourism destination is a multifaceted narrative that intertwines economic diversification, strategic governmental initiatives, and the leveraging of sport mega-events. The Qatari government has recognised the need for economic diversification, with the National Vision 2030 underscoring the importance of developing sectors such as tourism, education, and healthcare to reduce dependency on hydrocarbons (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). Tourism, in particular, has emerged as a key pillar in Qatar's diversification strategy. The government has invested heavily in developing infrastructure, including hotels, transportation, and cultural sites, to attract international tourists (Yap et al., 2023). Qatar's strategic location, coupled with its investment in hospitality venues, aims to position the country as a competitive player in the Middle East tourism market. This shift is not merely an economic necessity but also a strategic move to enhance Qatar's global standing and soft power (Brannagan & Grix, 2023).

There are only a limited number of studies regarding the investment of the Qatari government to develop the country as a tourism destination. Ozturk and Al-Kuwari (2021) used annual data from 1995 to 2018 to test if the tourism-led-growth hypothesis would be useful to explain investments in tourism. Their results suggest that tourism does not have a short-run economic impact on the country, but it may have an impact in the long run. The main argument was that a 10% increase in the number of tourist arrivals would lead to approximately a 13% increase in Qatar's GDP in the long run. After the 2022 World Cup, a few studies have tried to check the impact of the event on Qatari tourism, but they are limited in scope. For example, Acheampong et al. (2024) interviewed fans who travelled to Qatar to attend the 2022 World Cup and found that these fans agreed that hosting the event had changed the country's image as a tourism destination, with some of them expressing intentions to come back. The results rely on perceptions of a very specific group (event attendees) and a limited number of potential tourists and do not explore actual impacts on tourism.

Official figures show that the country received 5,076,640 international tourists in 2024, reflecting a 25% increase from 2023 (Qatar Tourism, 2025) Among the six largest source markets for tourism to Qatar in 2024, India recorded the lowest percentage increase in visitor numbers (2%), substantially lower than the UK (39%), Saudi Arabia (35%), Kuwait (22%), the USA (21%), and the UAE (20%). In absolute terms, however, India remained the second-largest source market, with approximately 430,000 visitors in 2024, behind only Saudi Arabia. These figures highlight India's importance and potential to grow as a key outbound market for tourism to Qatar. India represents one of the most strategically important outbound tourism markets for Qatar due to its large and rapidly expanding middle class, strong air connectivity, geographic proximity, and long-standing economic and social ties between the two countries (ITB Berlin, 2025). Qatar Tourism identifies Indian visitors as a strategic market, aiming to double Indian tourist numbers in the next few years (Qatar Tourism, 2025).

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Participants and Procedures*

Operationally, football fans have been characterised as those who have attended or watched football events, consumed football-related content digitally or in broadcast media, and/or contributed to discussions in fan communities (Aichner, 2019). Given this definition, it is clear that Indian football fans do not constitute a formally defined or enumerable population, leading us to adopt a non-probability purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the boundaries of the target population cannot be precisely established (Neuman, 2014). This position is consistent with practice in quantitative consumer and sport fan research, where unbounded populations are common (Hair et al., 2009). The sampling strategy therefore reflects not a methodological concession but a response to the structural characteristics of the population under study.

Recruiting was conducted mainly through Blue Pilgrims, the largest organised supporters' group for the Indian national football teams (Palit, 2017). The first author is part of this community and shared the link to the online questionnaire with other participants through Blue Pilgrims' social media (Instagram and X). We opted for promoting the questionnaire only among this supporting group to guarantee that we were targeting fans with a certain level of involvement with football. Additionally, we used a screening question, asking about fans' involvement with the World Cup based on the number of matches they had watched. We dropped seven respondents from further analysis because they reported they had not watched matches in the 2022 World Cup. Most respondents (77%) watched between six and 11 matches, which represents an excellent level of involvement with the World Cup. For context, if a team reached the finals, it played seven matches. The final sample ($n = 301$) was composed mostly of employed ($n = 202$; 67%), academically educated ($n = 260$; 86% held at least an undergraduate degree), and male participants ($n = 190$; 63%), with a mean age of 24.7 years ($SD = 4.2$). The demographic profile of the sample is consistent with the characteristics of football supporters in India, whose fan base is disproportionately composed of young adults (37% of fans are within the range of 18–25 years old) and males (65%) (Rinishirley, 2026).

### *3.2. Scales*

Table 1 shows the scales used in this study. In the first section of the questionnaire, after the screening question, we measured involvement with the World Cup. The stem for the items in this section reads, "Thinking about your involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup, please, express your level of agreement with the items below". Based on the literature, we created four items that were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1—*strongly disagree*; 5—*strongly agree*). In the second section, we measured Qatar (attractions and hospitality) as a tourism destination in terms of its attributes (destination image). The items in these scales were adapted from Rocha and Fink (2017). The stem reads, "Please, indicate your perception about the strength of the association between Qatar and the following attributes", answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1—*extremely weak*; 5—*extremely strong*).

In the third section, we measured Qatar's benefits as a tourism destination (also adapted from Rocha & Fink, 2017). Benefits represent consumers' perceptions of the usefulness of a service (Keller, 1993). Benefits can have a functional, experiential or symbolic dimension. Previous investigations found that tourists look for symbolic benefits when they decide on destinations (Neirotti et al., 2001; Rocha & Fink, 2017). Following the literature, we used the symbolic dimension, which relies on perceptions that travelling to a certain destination will be a rare or once-in-a-lifetime experience or create opportunities for personal growth, to operationally define benefits. The stem for these items reads, "Please, express your level of agreement with the following items. Travelling to Qatar will be...", answered on a 5-point

Likert scale (1—*strongly disagree*; 5—*strongly agree*). In the fourth section, we measured attitudes toward visiting Qatar after the World Cup. The stem for this section reads, "Taking into account all other things, visiting Qatar in the near future will be...". The attitudes were measured using four semantic differential statements (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001), ranging from 1 to 5 (for example: 1—*Unenjoyable* to 5—*Enjoyable*).

**Table 1.** Factors, item wordings, factor loadings (λ), Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (ρ), mean and standard deviation of the measures used in the scales.

| Factors | Items | λ | AVE | *M* | *SD* | α | ρ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Involvement | | | 0.55 | 4.06 | 0.67 | 0.841 | 0.806 |
| | I kept up with match results and tournament updates. | 0.786 | | 3.96 | 0.77 | | |
| | I discussed the tournament with friends or family. | 0.736 | | 4.11 | 0.75 | | |
| | I felt emotionally connected to the FIFA World Cup 2022. | 0.757 | | 3.93 | 0.85 | | |
| | I actively followed the tournament on social media platforms. | 0.698 | | 4.24 | 0.87 | | |
| Destination image | | | | | | | |
| Attractions | | | 0.47 | 3.92 | 0.53 | 0.789 | 0.761 |
| | Beautiful scenery | 0.686 | | 3.84 | 0.68 | | |
| | Interesting cultural attractions | 0.679 | | 3.84 | 0.71 | | |
| | Interesting natural attractions | 0.700 | | 3.84 | 0.73 | | |
| Hospitality | | | 0.43 | 3.86 | 0.57 | 0.782 | 0.750 |
| | Suitable hotel accommodations | 0.683 | | 3.72 | 0.81 | | |
| | Personal safety | 0.653 | | 3.83 | 0.79 | | |
| | Friendly people | 0.634 | | 3.87 | 0.80 | | |
| Benefits | | | 0.53 | 4.13 | 0.64 | 0.825 | 0.808 |
| | Once-in-a-lifetime experience | 0.779 | | 4.06 | 0.83 | | |
| | An opportunity for cultural growth | 0.668 | | 4.08 | 0.83 | | |
| | A rare experience | 0.728 | | 4.21 | 0.85 | | |
| Tourism intentions | | | | | | | |
| Attitude toward visiting Qatar | | | 0.58 | 4.19 | 0.66 | 0.870 | 0.858 |
| | Unenjoyable (1)—Enjoyable (5) | 0.775 | | 4.19 | 0.85 | | |
| | Boring (1)—Fun (5) | 0.807 | | 4.11 | 0.87 | | |
| | Unpleasant (1)—Pleasant (5) | 0.693 | | 4.20 | 0.88 | | |
| | Unfavourable (1)—Favourable (5) | 0.762 | | 4.19 | 0.82 | | |

### *3.3. Data Analysis*

We tested a mediational structural model (Figure 1), which allowed us to answer the research questions and compare the usefulness of the two plausible theories.

We started with descriptive statistics (Table 1) and then conducted covariance-based structural equation modelling, following the two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). From the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we calculated internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha—α) and composite reliability (ρ) (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2011). Convergent validity was calculated using the average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was evaluated using Wald $\chi^2$ tests of parameter equality (Bagozzi et al., 1991). We then evaluated the magnitude and significance of individual path coefficients in the model to respond to the research questions. Because the structural model is a mediational model, we also estimated indirect effects (IND) using the

product-of-coefficients strategy (Sobel, 1982) with the multivariate delta method (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) available in Mplus Version 7.11.

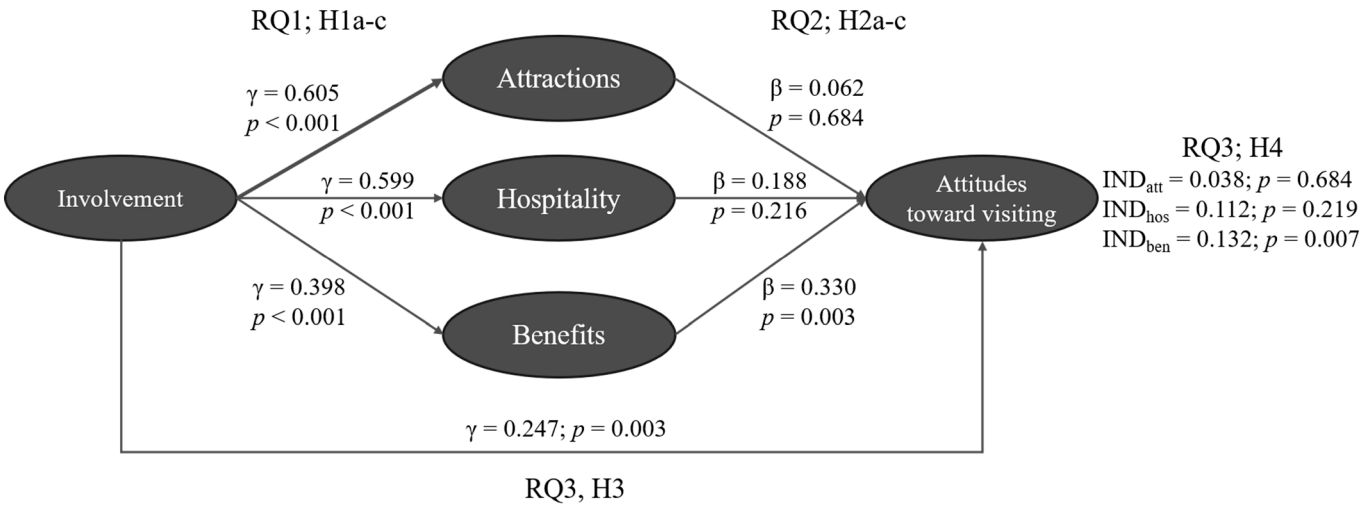



**Figure 1.** Structural relations among involvement, Qatar attributes and benefits as a tourism destination, and intentions to visit the country after the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

## 4. Results

Results of the CFA show that the measurement model fit the data closely (RMSEA [90% CI] = 0.057 [0.045; 0.068]; CFI = 0.948; TLI = 0.934; SRMR = 0.049; $\chi^2$/df = 1.97). All scales showed internal consistency (α) and composite reliability (ρ) estimates well above 0.70, supporting the reliability of the scales. AVEs of three scales (involvement, benefits, and attitudes toward visiting) are above 0.50, indicating convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Although two scales (attractions and hospitality) yielded AVE values slightly below the threshold of 0.50, their composite reliability (ρ) exceeded 0.70 and standardised factor loadings (λ) were large and significant (Table 1), supporting the use of these scales in the structural model. The significant results of the Wald chi-square test for parameter equalities ($\chi^2$ = 162.03; df = 10; $p < 0.001$) showed that none of the correlations between pairs of constructs were equal to one, supporting discriminant validity (Bagozzi et al., 1991). Overall, the CFA results support the psychometric properties of the scales and their use as latent variables in a structural model.

Means and standard deviations (Table 1) show that, on average, respondents had high involvement with the World Cup ($M$ = 4.06; $SD$ = 0.67). In the tourism attributes scale, results show that the associations between Qatar and tourism attractions ($M$ = 3.92; $SD$ = 0.53) and hospitality ($M$ = 3.86; $SD$ = 0.57) were a little below the mid-point (four), indicating that, on average, the associations were not so strong. Qatar benefits ($M$ = 4.13; $SD$ = 0.64) and intentions to visit the country after the World Cup ($M$ = 4.19; $SD$ = 0.66) were rated above the agreement point.

The structural model also fits the data closely (RMSEA [90% CI] = 0.055 [0.043; 0.066]; CFI = 0.953; TLI = 0.939; SRMR = 0.046; $\chi^2$/df = 1.89). Path coefficients indicate that involvement with the World Cup has informed the perceptions that respondents have about Qatar's attributes—attractions (γ = 0.605; $p < 0.001$) and hospitality (γ = 0.599; $p < 0.001$)—and benefits (γ = 0.398; $p < 0.001$) as a tourism destination. These results support a *yes* answer for RQ1 and allow us to accept H1a, H1b, and H1c.

However, the paths from Qatar tourism attributes to intentions to visit were small and non-significant, indicating that Qatar's attractions (β = 0.062; $p$ = 0.684) and hospitality (β = 0.188; $p$ = 0.216) do not inform intentions to visit the country. Qatar's benefits positively

impact intentions to visit the country ($\beta = 0.330$; $p = 0.003$), indicating that RQ2 cannot be answered with either yes or no. H2a and H2b are rejected, but H2c is accepted. Perceptions of Qatar's attractions and hospitality cannot explain intentions to visit the country after the event, but the benefits of travelling to Qatar can.

The path coefficient from involvement to intentions to visit Qatar after the World Cup ($\gamma = 0.247$; $p = 0.003$) supports a yes for RQ3 based on a direct effect. H3 is accepted. However, only one of the three indirect effects was significant, not fully supporting a yes for RQ3 via indirect routes. The indirect effect from involvement with the World Cup to intentions to visit Qatar through Qatar's benefits was significant (IND = 0.132; $p = 0.007$), but the indirect effects through attractions (IND = 0.038; $p = 0.684$) and hospitality (IND = 0.112; $p = 0.219$) were not. Therefore, H4 is partially accepted, considering the indirect effect through benefits only. Our results support only dimension-specific mediation rather than a general mediating role of destination image.

## 5. Discussion

The objective of the study was to explore and describe the relationships between fans' involvement with the 2022 Men's FIFA World Cup, their perceptions of Qatar as a tourism destination and intentions of future visits. Descriptive statistics results showed that Indian football fans who participated in the study had high involvement with the World Cup. Without this high involvement, there was little chance that the FIFA World Cup brand might have had any influence on their perception of Qatar as a tourism destination. Descriptive results for destination attributes show that the fans do not see a very strong association between Qatar and tourism attributes. But they think that visiting Qatar could bring some personal and cultural benefits, and express intentions to visit the country after the World Cup. A more positive destination image of sport mega-events' hosts has been reported in previous studies. For example, in the context of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, potential tourists also saw strong associations between Brazil and tourism destination attributes (Rocha & Fink, 2017). In the context of Beijing 2008, college students reported strong associations between China's tourism attributes such as attractions and hospitality (Gibson et al., 2008). These studies seem to indicate that, even for not-so-strong destination brands (like Brazil, and China), people tend to have positive cognitive evaluations when they are framed around sport mega-event hosts. Qatar still appears to have scope to improve potential tourists' perceptions of its tourism attributes.

Inferential statistics showed that involvement with the 2022 World Cup could inform perceptions that respondents had about Qatar's tourism attributes and benefits. The positive relationship between involvement and destination image has been proposed by previous studies and can be explained through Keller's (1993) brand image framework. Involvement with the World Cup seems to have worked as a mechanism through which the destination brand image associations are formed and strengthened: the more individuals reported being involved with the event, the more favourably they rated the destination image. This pattern is consistent with prior mega-event research. Gibson et al. (2008) found that greater involvement with the Beijing Olympics was associated with more favourable perceptions of China's destination attributes. Similarly, S. Kim and Morrison (2005) demonstrated that South Korea's destination image among foreign tourists who visited the country improved following the 2002 FIFA World Cup. In the current study, involvement with the 2022 FIFA World Cup strengthened Qatar's destination image along the dimensions of attractions, hospitality, and benefits, consistent with Keller's (1993) contention that strong, favourable, and unique associations are central to building destination image value.

The directional paths from the destination image of Qatar to intentions to visit the country after the World Cup produced some different results: Qatar's attractions and

hospitality were not significant antecedents of intentions to visit. Contrary to our results, earlier work has reported a clear and positive relationship between destination image and visit intention. Gibson et al. (2008), for instance, demonstrated that destination image was meaningfully linked to intentions to visit China after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Similarly, Chalip et al. (2003) found that destination image translated into intentions to visit the sport event host destination, reinforcing the view that destination image operates as a reliable and direct antecedent of visit intention. Taken at face value, these studies suggest that a direct significant relationship between destination image (attractions, hospitality, and benefits) and visit intention should be expected in the present study as well. As this has not happened in this study, we suggest that Qatar needs to develop further its image as an international tourism destination.

However, more recent research has challenged the assumption of an always-present positive relationship between the destination image of sport mega-event hosts and intentions to visit. Rocha and Fink (2017) found that, in the context of Rio 2016, the destination image of Brazil was not a great indicator of future visit intentions to Brazil (neither was the interaction between Brazil's destination image and the Olympics' image). Therefore, the non-significant or inconsistent pathways observed in the present study show the same pattern. It may be the case that Brazil and Qatar are not well-established tourism destinations, creating doubts about their tourism attractions and hospitality. We need further investigations in the context of sport mega-events to clarify this relationship.

We then found a significant direct impact from involvement with the 2022 World Cup to intentions to visit Qatar after the event, without passing through destination image attributes. A theoretical justification for testing this direct path came from signalling theory (Spence, 1974) that posits that under conditions of information asymmetry, where potential visitors lack direct experience or reliable information about an unfamiliar destination (like Qatar), a costly and highly visible signal (such as successfully hosting the World Cup) can be used by prospective tourists as a signal for inferring the host country's underlying quality and capability, without requiring the elaborated, multi-attribute processing implied by destination-image models. This reasoning is consistent with empirical findings reported by Sorrentino et al. (2020), who found that event experience had a positive and direct impact on tourists' intentions to return to and recommend the host destination following the America's Cup World Series, independent of a formally modelled destination image construct. Similarly, Brown et al. (2016) demonstrated that sport involvement directly predicted spectators' intentions to revisit the host sites following the London 2012 Olympic Games.

While such previous studies have identified similar direct relationships (Brown et al., 2016; Sorrentino et al., 2020), they did not explain these findings through signalling theory. By applying this theoretical lens to the context of Qatar 2022, the study advances understanding of how sport mega-events may influence tourism intentions by signalling destination quality and reducing uncertainty, without necessarily requiring changes in destination image. The present study demonstrates a direct relationship between World Cup involvement and post-event visit intentions that operates independently of destination image attributes. This finding extends the application of signalling theory in sport tourism by suggesting that mega-event involvement may influence prospective tourists' intentions. Further investigation is necessary to understand if such intentions convert into actual behaviours.

Although those studies suggest that involvement with a sport mega-event may exert a direct influence on subsequent visit intentions toward the host destination, another body of evidence still indicates that this relationship operates indirectly, through the formation and strengthening of destination image (Gibson et al., 2008; Rocha & Fink, 2017). Rather than translating involvement straight into the intention to visit, event-related engagement

appears to first reshape how individuals perceive the host country's destination image, which would then act as the proximal driver of intentions. Our results provided support for this indirect route only through perceived benefits of visiting Qatar, but not through the country's tourism attributes (attractions and hospitality) of the country. Indirect effects have not previously been tested using the approach adopted in this study. Among the studies available in the literature, Rocha and Fink (2017) are the ones that get closer, as they tested the interaction between the event (Olympic Games) and the destination image to explain intentions to visit Brazil after the event. Like our study, they found mixed results, with only destination hospitality and benefits having a significant impact on future visit intentions, but neither destination (Brazil) attractions nor interactions with the Olympics had a significant impact. Taken together, these results suggest that the indirect effect cannot be fully supported and still needs further investigation.

*Theoretical and Practical Implications*

Our findings have important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the simple scale combining attitudinal and behavioural involvement showed very good psychometric properties. This is an important theoretical contribution of the current study, mainly for post-event studies, where relying on participants' memories to provide objective information (e.g., number of matches watched) is always complicated. Having a simple and psychometrically sound scale is therefore beneficial, as it offers an excellent alternative to measuring involvement solely through behavioural involvement indicators or exclusively through attitudes towards attendance.

Another important theoretical contribution of this study lies in its explicit testing of two competing theoretical explanations for how involvement with a sport mega-event translates into intentions to visit the host country after the event. Contrasting Keller's (1993) destination brand image conceptual framework with Spence's (1974) signalling theory revealed that the latter offered a more consistent explanation of future visit intentions, with involvement exerting a direct effect on intentions that did not require destination image as a mediator. This finding carries meaningful implications for how researchers theoretically frame studies of mega-event tourism impacts going forward. The broader theoretical implication is that mega-event tourism researchers may need new designs to test how involvement and destination image may impact intentions to visit. This is a meaningful departure from the dominant paradigm in the sport tourism literature, where destination image has largely been treated as the obligatory mediating mechanism through which any event-related stimulus must pass before it can influence behavioural outcomes (e.g., Chalip et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2008).

It is important to note that we are not suggesting destination image should be ignored altogether, as this construct continues to play an important role in attracting tourists more broadly. Rather, the indirect route from involvement to visit intention may be strengthened if perceptions of attractions and hospitality in some host countries like Qatar are improved. This carries practical implications for Qatar and its tourism authorities, who may consider investing in the diversification and promotion of cultural and leisure attractions (beyond those directly tied to the World Cup) and the quality of its hospitality. These suggestions apply to countries with a similar tourism profile.

For event organisers and tourism authorities in host countries like Qatar, the finding that involvement with the event may exert influence on visit intentions independently of destination image suggests that creating stronger connections between the event and the place may be more valuable in the short run than promoting destination image alone to attract visitors. In practical terms, this implies that marketing and promotional efforts may prioritise deepening spectators' and viewers' engagement with the event itself, for example,

through storytelling that ties the event's identity to the host destination and sustained media narratives that fuse the two images (the event and the host). For destinations like Qatar, where the World Cup represented a unique opportunity for global visibility, this suggests that the event's legacy value may be better captured by embedding the destination within the event experience itself.

The findings suggest that creating stronger connections between the event and the place should be viewed as a complementary strategy rather than a replacement for promoting destination image alone. While strengthening the event–place connection may be more advantageous in the short run to attract visitors who were highly involved with a specific sport event (like the participants in the study), promoting destination image remains necessary in the long run to attract other prospective visitors whose travel decisions are less anchored in the event itself and more reliant on broader perceptions of Qatar's attractions, hospitality, and benefits as a destination. Tourism authorities may therefore benefit from pursuing both strategies in parallel, using event-linked messaging to capitalise on the engagement of World Cup audiences while continuing to invest in the destination image dimensions that will sustain visitation from a wider, less event-involved tourist base over the longer term. Although our findings inform these practical implications, caution is needed when generalising them beyond the specific context of Indian football fans.

## 6. Limitations and Future Studies

The study has several delimitations established to make the research feasible. These include the sampling strategy (recruiting participants from a group of football fans who were highly likely to have been involved with the World Cup), the geographical area (India as the outbound market), the sport event (the 2022 World Cup), the research design (cross-sectional study), and the variables under investigation (from other possible indicators of future visit intentions but based on the theoretical frameworks informing the study). Beyond the intentional delimitations, the study has some limitations. First, data were collected around two years after the 2022 World Cup. Respondents might have difficulty remembering their attitudes and behaviours toward the event. We tried to mitigate this by using a scale rather than asking for specific behavioural indicators like the number of matches watched or hours spent consuming media.

Second, we relied on self-reported intentions rather than actual behaviours regarding future visits. Expressed intentions may not translate into future visits to Qatar due to other factors such as cost, visa policies, and/or economic conditions. However, they are still our best estimates. Third, we focused on highly engaged football fans only, whereas a comparison between this group and other groups (e.g., not-so-engaged fans and non-football fans) might have been beneficial to explore further some important points like the relevance of destination image. We suggest that future studies can explore groups with different levels of sport and event engagement and, whenever possible, rely on actual behaviours after the event. Future studies can also explore different events and different outbound markets. A diversity of events and outbound markets is necessary for some of the new findings of the current study to be probed and to provide practical suggestions for host countries/cities of sport events that aim to capitalise on the increase in international tourism. Fourth, two constructs in our scale (attractions and hospitality) fell slightly below the recommended threshold for convergent validity. However, given support from previous research using the same scales (e.g., Rocha & Fink, 2017) and evidence of internal consistency, we decided to retain the original items. We acknowledge that this represents a psychometric limitation of these two constructs in the present sample.

Despite these limitations, we concluded that this study advanced theory and practice in many important ways. Testing alternative theories and providing a parsimonious sport

event involvement scale are two important theoretical contributions. Suggesting promotion strategies that strengthen the direct connection between the event and the host country, rather than always relying on destination image as a mediator, is an innovative practical implication for Qatar and similar countries seeking to maximise the economic benefits of international tourism following sport mega-events mainly in the short run.

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