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Rival Frames: Moroccan and Algerian Media Framing of Morocco's Hosting of AFCON 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* framed Morocco's hosting of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON 2025), with the objective of examining how regional rivalry shapes media narratives surrounding a major sporting event. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative textual analysis of a corpus of 25 articles published during the two-month period following 20 December 2025, with relevant excerpts from *El Watan* translated from French into English for the purposes of analysis and citation. The findings reveal two contrasting framing structures: *Morocco World News* constructs Morocco as a legitimate, internationally recognized host, emphasizing organizational success, soft power projection, and resilience against unfair criticism, while *El Watan* portrays Morocco as a manipulative political actor projecting an artificial image of progress over a society marked by internal tensions. These opposing representations demonstrate how the same event can generate radically divergent narratives shaped by geopolitical context, with both outlets relying on selective sourcing and evaluative language to produce polarized portrayals that extend beyond sport into broader questions of legitimacy and regional power. This study ultimately highlights the role of media framing in constructing national image and reinforcing political tensions within the Maghreb.

KEYWORDS

Media Framing

AFCON 2025

Morocco

Algeria

Soft Power

Introduction

International sporting events are highly visible arenas where nations project identity to global audiences, functioning as sites of symbolic politics and diplomatic signaling (Grix and Lee 536; Black 262). Media coverage transforms these moments into narratives about national competence and geopolitical standing (Vincent and Kian 307; Walsh and Wiedmann 154). Football carries particular weight in Africa, making AFCON 2025 a major symbolic and geopolitical event (Alegi 111). Hosting offers Morocco visibility and self-representation, but also exposes it to scrutiny shaped by regional rivalries rather than domestic media alone (Knott and Tinaz 3).

This study conducts a comparative framing analysis of *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* during the two months following 20 December 2025, examining how Morocco's hosting is constructed within two media contexts shaped by longstanding rivalry (Entman, "Framing" 7). The outlets were chosen for their ideological divergence, making them productive sites for comparing how the same event is framed across rival contexts. Two questions guide the study:

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(1) What dominant frames do *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* use to construct Morocco's hosting? (2) How do these patterns reflect the Morocco-Algeria rivalry?

Existing scholarship on mega-event framing has focused mainly on hosts projecting image outward, with little attention to how a rival state frames the same event. This study addresses that gap, making two contributions: a mirror framing model describing how rival outlets use symmetrical strategies while inverting moral and political valence; and an extension of soft power frameworks beyond host-audience dynamics to adversarial coverage.

Literature Review

Sport Mega-Events and Nation Branding

Sport mega-events function as platforms through which states project national identity, modernity, and legitimacy. Scholars have formalized this under the "geopolitical economy of sport," arguing that hosting decisions, investment flows, and media narratives are increasingly inseparable from state power and international positioning (Chaib and Anagnostopoulos 2). In Africa specifically, continental tournaments have become sites of competing bids for regional leadership, with hosting states deploying sport as a vehicle for developmental legitimacy (Grix and Lee 527). Hosting allows governments to communicate competence, stability, and development to domestic and external audiences (Grix and Lee 7–8), positioning these events as mediated spectacles embedded in nation branding and soft power (Næss 2).

This symbolic capital, however, depends on media representation: nation-branding success hinges not just on staging the event but on how media frame it (Alhassan 105). Coverage of the Olympics and World Cup routinely extends beyond sport into governance, economic performance, and political legitimacy (Alshikhy et al. 1–2), reinforcing state narratives of progress or, alternatively, foregrounding mismanagement and instability. Mega-events thus become sites where national image is constructed and contested (Alhassan 80).

The Africa Cup of Nations carries particular symbolic weight in this regard, offering hosts a chance to assert regional leadership and institutional capacity (Cleland 18) while inviting scrutiny from neighboring states whose interpretations are shaped by regional rivalry. This underscores the need to examine how hosting is framed not only domestically, but within proximate geopolitical contexts.

Moroccan–Algerian Relations and Regional Rivalry

Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025 must be situated within Moroccan-Algerian relations, marked since independence by tension, competition, and unresolved territorial disputes (Sour 10). The 1963 Sand War embedded early mistrust, and subsequent decades saw recurring strain centered on the Sahara conflict (Sour 13), with relations fluctuating between engagement and rupture, including the 1994 border closure and the 2021 suspension of diplomatic ties (Fabiani 208). Both states compete for regional leadership through continental institutions and diplomatic networks (Baida 56).

Sport has periodically intersected with this rivalry: football carries strong national symbolism in both countries, with matches historically charged with political meaning (Tchier), and hosting a major tournament thus acquires symbolic significance beyond its athletic dimension (Beissel and Kohe 594).

AFCON 2025 unfolds against this backdrop of diplomatic tension (Kayssi and Zarhloule). Morocco's hosting may be read as an assertion of regional influence, while for Algeria the tournament may intersect with existing narratives of leadership and legitimacy in North Africa,

providing essential context for understanding its significance within the Maghrebi media landscape.

Sport, Media, and Maghrebi Geopolitics

Sport in North Africa is inseparable from regional politics, as athletic competition often reproduces geopolitical rivalries (Mirzayeva 118). Football has long served as a vehicle for national identity and inter-state tension management in the Maghreb (Fedele 11). Media actively construct and amplify rivalries: hosting offers governments soft power, while rival media may undermine the host's symbolic gains, an asymmetry that makes Maghrebi coverage of AFCON 2025 analytically productive (Mauro 936).

The Morocco-Algeria rivalry supplies this context. Territorial disputes have long undermined cooperation, evident in the Arab Maghreb League's dysfunction since 1989, entangling diplomacy with sport since 2021, as when Algeria denied entry to Moroccan journalists covering the 2022 Mediterranean Games (Čizmić). Football has historically been a space for settling political scores, and Algeria's World Cup performances were instrumentalized by the Bouteflika regime as evidence of regime legitimacy (Amara and Bouandel 740). Algeria has positioned Morocco as a "functional other" sustaining its self-definition, meaning coverage of Moroccan achievements is unlikely to be merely descriptive (Roudani).

Existing work on Moroccan sporting identity has focused on Western media rather than intra-regional coverage, with football diplomacy instrumentalizing sporting success as soft power since Qatar 2022. Moroccan and Algerian media share a linguistic space yet diverge politically, making their framing choices central to this study.

Press Systems in Algeria and Morocco

Both press systems emerged from post-independence state-building that positioned media as instruments of national consolidation rather than independent watchdogs. Algeria's press liberalized after 1989, dismantling the FLN monopoly and enabling independent papers like *El Watan* (founded 1990), though ownership concentration and state-linked advertising still constrain editorial independence (Ben Fatta et al. 1090–1091). Morocco's landscape similarly combines state broadcasting with a nominally independent press under the 2002 Press Code, which permits prosecution for content threatening public order or the monarchy; self-censorship on topics like Western Sahara is well documented, though outward-facing outlets like *Morocco World News* operate with greater latitude on foreign affairs (Chafik and Iharchane 8–9).

These asymmetries matter: El Watan's adversarial coverage may reflect the relative openness Algerian papers have toward external targets, while Morocco World News's promotional framing reflects its dependence on Morocco's international visibility.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

This study is grounded in framing theory, which posits that news discourse does not simply reflect reality but actively organizes it through selection, emphasis, and exclusion (Entman, "Framing" 7). By making certain aspects of an event more salient than others, frames guide audiences toward particular interpretations (Boswell et al. 2), shaping how issues are defined, which actors are legitimized or criticized, and what evaluative tone underlies the narrative.

Framing operates at multiple levels: textually, through headlines, lexical choices, and source selection (Entman, "Framing" 7); discursively, by connecting events to broader narratives of national identity and geopolitical positioning; and contextually, shaped by political environment

and historical relations between states (Klein and Amis 1325). Comparative framing analysis assumes different national media contexts will generate distinct narratives about the same event, reflecting their respective political cultures and strategic interests (Kouiyache and Badad 101-02).

For AFCON 2025, framing theory provides a systematic basis for examining how Morocco's hosting is constructed within Moroccan and Algerian coverage, focusing on themes of organization, security, regional leadership, and symbolic nationhood. Entman's four functions (problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) served as a sensitizing lens rather than a generative coding scheme: they informed the analytical vocabulary without predetermining the categories applied. Frames were derived inductively from the corpus, with Entman's functions drawn upon descriptively, post hoc, to articulate what those frames were doing.

Soft Power, Nation Branding, and Identity Construction

Framing theory alone does not capture the broader ideological and geopolitical stakes of AFCON 2025 coverage. This study draws on four additional frameworks. Nye's soft power describes a state's capacity to attract influence through cultural appeal and institutional credibility rather than coercion, with mega-event hosting widely theorized as a soft power instrument (Nye 11), informing the analysis of *Morocco World News*'s coverage as state communication strategy. Anholt's competitive identity extends this, arguing national image is actively managed through symbolic communication (Anholt 25, 78); this applies to both outlets, as *Morocco World News* engages in affirmative brand-building while *El Watan* counter-frames against it. Anderson's imagined communities holds that national identity is constructed through shared narratives circulated by media (Anderson 6), positioning both outlets as agents constructing national selfhood against a regional other. Finally, Said's Orientalism shows how representations of the non-Western other can encode assumptions of cultural deficiency or superficial modernity (Said 36, 59), informing *El Watan*'s portrayal of Morocco's modernity as a façade and *Morocco World News*'s counter-narrative against an imperial gaze.

Together, these frameworks provide the vocabulary to interpret not only how each outlet organizes coverage, but why those choices carry such weight. Hallin and Mancini's typology, used to contextualize framing, was developed for Western systems and has documented limitations in postcolonial contexts; this study uses it as a loose descriptive vocabulary rather than a classificatory system, acknowledging the limits of that fit.

Methodology

Qualitative Textual Analysis

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Morocco World News* and *El Watan* constructed Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025, identifying recurring patterns in language, emphasis, and narrative structure to reveal how each outlet positions Morocco as host (Tesch 4). Rather than seeking a single definitive interpretation, textual analysis explores a range of plausible meanings to uncover the political and ideological assumptions informing coverage (Altheide 288).

The study covers the two-month period from 20 December 2025 through 20 February 2026, capturing heightened media attention around the tournament's launch, progression, and aftermath. Articles were collected directly from the searchable archives of moroccoworldnews.com and elwatan.dz, with no external databases used. Searches combined

anchor terms ("AFCON 2025" OR "Africa Cup of Nations" OR "CAN 2025") with thematic terms via AND logic ("Morocco" AND "host," "organization," "infrastructure," "security," "diplomacy," "soft power," or "regional"), using equivalent French terms for *El Watan*.

A purposive sampling strategy applied three criteria: temporal spread across the full window, thematic breadth across organization, politics, infrastructure, and social context, and a mix of news reports, features, and opinion pieces. Articles were further filtered for evaluative or interpretive language, yielding 25 in total: 10 from *Morocco World News* (5 news reports, 3 features, and 2 opinion pieces) and 15 from *El Watan* (2 news reports and 13 opinion pieces), for a combined total of 7 news reports, 3 features, and 15 opinion pieces.

Analysis was inductive: frames emerged from close reading rather than a predefined scheme, assessed for thematic consistency and capacity to capture cross-outlet differences. Relative prevalence of each frame, by article count and column space, is indicated in the Results, though the analysis remains qualitative. Entman's four functions served as a post-hoc descriptive vocabulary, not a predetermined coding template.

Media Outlets and Rationale

This study analyzes AFCON 2025 coverage through a comparative examination of *El Watan* and *Morocco World News*, selected for their ideological divergence and contrasting orientations. *El Watan* represents an Algerian perspective often shaped by regional political rivalry, while *Morocco World News*, an English-language outlet targeting international audiences, contributes to Morocco's external image-building.

The two outlets also differ in audience composition and structural incentives, which may independently explain framing divergences. *Morocco World News*'s English-language, international focus creates incentives to project a positive image regardless of rivalry, since its relevance depends on Morocco's visibility abroad. *El Watan*, serving a domestic Algerian readership, operates where critical coverage of a regional rival may be expected by its audience. This study treats audience structure as a competing explanation, engaged alongside the geopolitical rivalry thesis in the Discussion.

Researcher Positionality

As a Moroccan researcher analyzing coverage of an event involving Morocco and Algeria, the author acknowledges that this national background may have shaped interpretive choices. Frames were derived inductively from textual evidence, with critical and celebratory narratives in both outlets treated with equal analytical scrutiny and no framing privileged on national or political grounds. While complete neutrality cannot be claimed in interpretive research, this study strove for fairness and transparency throughout.

Translation Procedure

Since *El Watan* publishes primarily in French, all articles from that outlet were accessed and analyzed in the original French, with translations produced directly by the author, who holds full fluency in both languages; no automated translation tools were used. Evaluatively charged vocabulary lacking direct English equivalents is retained in French alongside its English rendering to preserve interpretive transparency. Formal back-translation was not performed, though sustained bilingual engagement with the original texts minimized the risk of semantic distortion. Readers seeking interpretive precision are encouraged to consult the original French sources, cited in full in the Works Cited.

Results

El Watan

Textual analysis of *El Watan* reveals three dominant frames: Morocco's Political Grip, Racial Contradictions, and Infrastructure as Façade. Across these, coverage employs evaluative language, political references, and selective sourcing to construct a critical narrative, using recurring lexical choices and strategic quotations to situate the tournament within broader debates over Morocco's regional influence and image.

Morocco's Political Grip

One of the most prominent frames portrays Morocco as using political influence and institutional leverage to control outcomes within African football. Rather than depicting AFCON primarily as a sporting competition, *El Watan* frequently situates the tournament within a broader narrative of political maneuvering and power struggles inside the Confederation of African Football (CAF).

Articles repeatedly emphasize Morocco's alleged influence through key football officials, particularly Fouzi Lekjaa, president of the Moroccan Football Federation and CAF vice-president. This personalization of power positions Moroccan leadership as central to institutional manipulation. In the article "*CAF: Why a Moroccan Referee for the Third-Place Match?*" discussing arbitration decisions during the tournament, the newspaper claims that "the powerful Moroccan lobby within CAF is present everywhere in the organization of the competition" (Ouahib). The expression "powerful Moroccan lobby" suggests systematic influence rather than isolated incidents.

Similarly, the same article questions the neutrality of refereeing appointments, arguing that CAF made an unusual decision by maintaining "a Moroccan referee within the group officiating matches involving direct competitors" (Ouahib). Such framing implies structural favoritism and reinforces the perception that Morocco's role as host allowed it to shape institutional decisions.

The narrative becomes even more explicit in commentary analyzing disciplinary proceedings following controversial matches. In *"Morocco–Senegal Affair: The Honor of African Football at Stake"*, the newspaper claims that the tournament revealed "the total hold Morocco exercises within CAF institutions" (Ouahib). The wording "mainmise totale" frames Morocco not simply as influential but as dominating African football governance.

The language used throughout these articles is highly evaluative and often moralizing. Expressions such as "chantage," "manigances," and "abus d'influence" portray Morocco's conduct as unethical political behavior rather than legitimate sporting competition. These terms reinforce a broader geopolitical narrative in which Morocco is presented as strategically using sport to extend regional power.

Importantly, this frame frequently draws on references to institutional actors rather than only journalists' commentary. CAF disciplinary bodies, football federations, and administrative decisions are cited to give legitimacy to the claims. However, these sources are selectively interpreted to support the broader narrative of Moroccan interference. Through this approach, *El Watan* reframes sporting controversies as evidence of geopolitical rivalry within African football.

Morocco's Racial Contradictions

A second prominent frame depicts Morocco as a society experiencing racial tension and hostility toward Sub-Saharan Africans. This narrative emerges particularly in coverage following Morocco's defeat in the tournament final, where social unrest is portrayed as revealing deeper societal contradictions.

The article *"After Morocco's Defeat in the AFCON Final: A Wave of Anti-Black Hate"* describes violent incidents targeting African migrants after the match. The report claims that "scenes of violence erupted outside the stadium in Rabat where angry supporters launched what resembled a real hunt for Black people regardless of nationality" (Berriah). The phrase "hunt for Black people" dramatizes the events and constructs a powerful image of collective hostility.

The article further reinforces this frame through direct quotations from witnesses and victims. One migrant quoted in the report recounts discrimination in everyday life, stating: "I called a ride through Indrive, and when the driver heard my accent he immediately hung up" (Berriah). Such testimonies personalize the narrative, transforming social tensions into lived experiences of exclusion.

Similarly, the article describes racist insults allegedly shouted in public spaces: "Go back home, dirty Blacks! Return to your desert!" (Berriah). By reproducing these statements verbatim, the newspaper foregrounds the severity of racial hostility while amplifying its emotional impact on readers.

In addition to eyewitness accounts, the article cites statements from civil society organizations. In another article, "*Moroccan Association for Human Rights: Denouncing Racism after the AFCON*" the Moroccan Association for Human Rights is quoted expressing "deep concern about the multiplication of hate campaigns and threats targeting migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa" (Berriah). The use of such sources lends institutional credibility to the narrative of widespread discrimination.

The tone of these articles is strongly condemnatory, often presenting racism as symptomatic of broader political dynamics. One commentary links these tensions to state discourse, arguing that "this medieval offensive against people of color is the consequence of a political strategy that fueled nationalist sentiment during the tournament" (Berriah). By attributing social hostility to political mobilization, the newspaper situates racism within a broader critique of Moroccan governance. Overall, this frame constructs Morocco not only as a problematic host of the tournament but also as a society struggling with internal contradictions between its international image and domestic realities.

Infrastructure as Façade

A third recurring frame questions the authenticity of Morocco's modern image by portraying the country's sporting infrastructure as a superficial façade masking deeper problems. While several articles acknowledge the impressive stadiums and facilities used during AFCON, this recognition is often followed by critical commentary undermining their symbolic value.

One commentary, "*Commentary / CAF: Morocco Suffers Another Setback*" notes that "many observers admired the beautiful stadiums and excellent pitches throughout the competition" but immediately adds that the tournament ultimately exposed "the arrogance and political ambitions surrounding the Moroccan organization" (Berriah). The juxtaposition of praise and criticism constructs a narrative in which physical infrastructure cannot compensate for alleged institutional misconduct.

Similarly, another article, "CAN-2025 Is Ironically a Golden Opportunity for Algerian Soft Power" argues that Morocco invested heavily in projecting a modern image but failed to achieve

the expected sporting dominance. According to the report, "the hype built around the Moroccan team quickly dissipated, leaving behind an implacable reality" (Abderrahmane). Words used in the article such as "tapage" suggest that promotional narratives surrounding Morocco's success were exaggerated or artificially constructed.

This framing often appears alongside references to international perception. One commentary argues that Morocco has carefully cultivated an image of modernization, noting that "this carefully constructed image of modernity has convinced many foreigners" (Abderrahmane). However, the article claims that the events of the tournament revealed contradictions beneath this image.

The narrative culminates in a broader critique of Morocco's political strategy. One commentary suggests that the tournament demonstrated "the hypocrisy of a system that seeks to present itself as modern while relying on questionable practices behind the scenes" (Abderrahmane). The use of moral language such as "hypocrisy" reinforces the broader argumentative structure of the coverage.

Through this frame, AFCON becomes a symbolic moment where Morocco's national image is tested. The modern stadiums and large-scale investments associated with the tournament are acknowledged but ultimately reframed as tools of image management rather than genuine indicators of progress.

Morocco World News

The qualitative textual analysis of *Morocco World News* coverage during AFCON 2025 reveals three dominant and interrelated frames: Africa's Benchmark Host, Soft Power Actor, and The Unfairly Criticized Host. Across these frames, the outlet consistently employs affirmative and assertive language, mobilizes institutional and international sources, and constructs a narrative of national competence, legitimacy, and continental leadership.

Africa's Benchmark Host

A central frame positions Morocco as setting a new standard for hosting major sporting events, emphasizing organizational excellence, infrastructural sophistication, and logistical precision. Coverage repeatedly constructs AFCON 2025 as a turning point not only for Morocco but for African football as a whole.

In "*Morocco's AFCON 2025: A Masterclass in Hosting Marred by Final-Act Mayhem*" (Benkhar), the tournament is described as "the gold standard, the most secure, most polished, and most professional in the tournament's storied history." Such superlative language elevates Morocco beyond a successful host to a benchmark against which future tournaments should be measured. The article further emphasizes material indicators of success, including "state of the art stadiums," "high speed TGVs," and "five star digs," constructing a narrative of modernity aligned with global (particularly European) standards.

This framing is reinforced through reliance on authoritative external validation. In "*AU Commission Acclaims Morocco's 'Exemplary' AFCON 2025 Organization*" (Faouzi), the African Union Commission praises Morocco's "professionalism" and "outstanding hospitality," while CAF's president describes the tournament as "the most successful edition in the tournament's history." These endorsements function as legitimizing devices, shifting the evaluation from national self-praise to internationally recognized achievement.

Similarly, infrastructure and logistics are framed as seamless and unprecedented. The same article highlights "nine state-of-the-art brand-new or upgraded stadiums," "high-speed rail lines," and "renovated airports and 5G networks," constructing a technologically advanced

image of the host nation. The absence of major incidents is also repeatedly emphasized, as Benkhar notes "no major incidents, no violence on the home front," reinforcing a narrative of control and efficiency.

Even moments of crisis are incorporated into this frame. In "*How Morocco's Security System Prevented AFCON's Final from Turning into Chaos*" (Kabbour), the focus is not on the disruption itself but on the response, described as "a measured response" where authorities "restored order and stopped the chaos from spreading." The emphasis on restraint and professionalism reframes potential failure into evidence of institutional strength.

Overall, this frame constructs Morocco as not merely a capable host, but as the new continental standard for large-scale sporting events, using evaluative language, infrastructure-focused descriptions, and external validation to reinforce this image.

Soft Power Actor

A second dominant frame presents AFCON 2025 as part of a broader state strategy in which sport functions as an instrument of diplomacy, economic development, and global positioning. Here, Morocco is framed not just as an organizer, but as a calculated and forward-looking geopolitical actor.

In "*How Morocco Is Turning AFCON 2025 into a Soft Power Engine*" (Ben Gamra), published three days after the opening match, the tournament is explicitly conceptualized as "a tool of soft power, a way of gaining influence and increasing geopolitical credibility." This framing extends the meaning of the event beyond sport, embedding it within long-term national strategy. The article stresses that Morocco's investments are "not because of the AFCON, but as part of a broader national development strategy," reinforcing the idea of continuity and planning. That this framing appeared just three days after competitive play began is itself analytically significant: rather than reflecting an extended track record of organizational success over the course of the tournament, the soft power narrative was already fully formed in the opening days of competition. This suggests *Morocco World News*'s soft power framing functioned less as a retrospective assessment of hosting performance than as a discursive frame the outlet was prepared to deploy from the outset, positioning it as an active participant in national image-building rather than a neutral reporter of events as they unfolded.

The language used consistently highlights intentionality and vision. AFCON is described as "vision-driven, not event-driven," while infrastructure projects are framed as evidence that "the country did not wait for AFCON… to transform itself." Such phrasing positions Morocco as proactive rather than reactive, contrasting with narratives often associated with developing contexts.

Economic discourse plays a crucial role in this frame. In "*AFCON 2025: Morocco Saw 190% Spike in Visitor Spending During Tournament*" (Faouzi), quantitative data is mobilized to demonstrate impact: "cross-border transactions… jumping by over 190%," "€1.5 billion in direct revenue," and "more than 100,000 jobs." These figures function as objective indicators of success, reinforcing the narrative of economic competence and return on investment.
Similarly, "*Morocco's €1.5 Billion AFCON Revenue Covers 80% of 2030 World Cup Costs*" (Faouzi) frames the tournament as part of a larger trajectory, with revenues funding "80% of the infrastructure needed for the 2030 World Cup." The use of phrases such as "sovereign investment" and "we gained a decade of development in 24 months" constructs AFCON as a catalyst for accelerated modernization.

Institutional and expert voices further strengthen this frame. Government officials, CAF representatives, and international actors are frequently cited, creating an authoritative discourse. For example, the Tourism Minister describes the event as providing "exceptional international

visibility," while CAF data highlights "record-breaking digital success with 6.1 billion digital impressions."

Overall, this frame positions Morocco as a strategic actor leveraging sport for long-term geopolitical and economic gains, using data-driven arguments, policy-oriented language, and institutional sources to construct an image of calculated national advancement.

The Unfairly Criticized Host

The third frame constructs Morocco as a nation subjected to unjust criticism, external hostility, or misrepresentation, while simultaneously emphasizing its resilience, legitimacy, and moral standing. This frame is particularly visible in moments of controversy.

In Benkhar's article, accusations of favoritism are dismissed as "baseless claims of a 'bought' path to glory," while foreign media are accused of "stoking frustration and waging a shadow war of psy-ops." This language delegitimizes criticism by framing it as irrational, politically motivated, or conspiratorial. The rhetorical question, "If Morocco could rig an AFCON, does that mean they scripted their 2022 World Cup semi-final run?", serves to undermine opposing narratives through reductio ad absurdum.

The same article constructs Morocco as dignified and principled, asserting that "Morocco emerges unbowed" and remains "a sanctuary of peace, guided by… hospitality, coexistence, and dignity." This moral positioning contrasts sharply with depictions of disruptive actors, such as Senegalese players who "walked off the field" or fans who "assaulted security personnel."

This defensive framing is also present in more theoretical language in Faouzi's article: "*AU Commission Acclaims Morocco's 'Exemplary' AFCON 2025 Organization*" where criticism is interpreted through a postcolonial lens. The article argues that skepticism toward Morocco reflects an "imperial gaze" that expects Africa to be associated with "chaos" and "failure." The statement that "what unsettles these observers is not mismanagement but its absence" reframes criticism as a reaction to Morocco's success rather than its shortcomings.

In "*How Morocco's Security System Prevented AFCON's Final from Turning into Chaos*" (Kabbour), external disorder is contrasted with internal control. While acknowledging that "football stopped" and tensions rose, the article emphasizes that Morocco "stopped it from becoming a full security collapse." The focus remains on competence under pressure, reinforcing resilience.

Even internal critique is incorporated in a controlled manner. In "*What Lessons Can We Draw from AFCON 2025?*" (Lamzouwaq), shortcomings are acknowledged, such as fan behavior or coaching decisions, but framed as opportunities for improvement rather than systemic failures. This maintains the overall positive narrative while allowing limited self-reflection.

Across these articles, tone plays a crucial role. Criticism is often countered with assertive, sometimes confrontational language, while Morocco is described in terms of dignity, stability, and legitimacy. Sources are selectively mobilized to reinforce this dichotomy, privileging institutional voices and dismissing opposing perspectives.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal two sharply contrasting media constructions of Morocco during AFCON 2025, reflecting broader patterns identified in the literature on media framing, nationalism, and international communication. In line with foundational work by Robert Entman, both *El Watan* and *Morocco World News* select, emphasize, and organize aspects of reality in ways that promote distinct interpretations of the same event (Entman, "Framing" 7).

However, the degree of polarization, evaluative tone, and narrative coherence observed here suggests that these frames are not merely journalistic choices, but are embedded within broader geopolitical and ideological contexts (Hallin and Mancini 67), which is a tendency the comparative media systems literature associates with high political parallelism, though that framework requires qualification when applied outside its original Western European scope (Voltmer 12).

The framing patterns identified in *El Watan* strongly align with literature on adversarial media systems and conflict-driven journalism. Studies in international media coverage demonstrate that media outlets operating within politically polarized environments tend to reproduce national geopolitical tensions in their reporting (Hallin and Mancini 89). The persistent portrayal of Morocco as exercising a "political grip" over African football reflects what scholars describe as strategic framing, where events are interpreted through power and conflict lenses rather than their primary domain, in this case sport (Entman, Projections 52; Hallin and Mancini 75).

The personalization of power around figures such as Fouzi Lekjaa is also consistent with findings in political communication research, which show that attributing institutional processes to individual actors simplifies complex systems and facilitates narratives of manipulation or control (Entman, Projections 49; Hallin and Mancini 78). This aligns with Entman's notion of framing as a process of defining problems and assigning responsibility (Entman, Projections 52). By repeatedly associating refereeing decisions and CAF governance with Moroccan actors, *El Watan* constructs a coherent narrative of systemic bias, even when evidence is indirect or selectively interpreted (Entman, "Framing" 24).

Moreover, the strong evaluative and moralizing language ("chantage," "abus d'influence") reflects what Teun A. van Dijk identifies as ideological discourse structures, where lexical choices reinforce in-group/out-group distinctions (van Dijk 33). In this case, Morocco is consistently positioned as an out-group actor engaging in illegitimate practices, which corresponds with broader research on media representations in contexts of regional rivalry (van Dijk 69; Hallin and Mancini 102).

The *Morocco's Racial Contradictions* frame similarly aligns with literature on event-driven amplification of social tensions. Scholars have shown that moments of crisis, particularly in highly visible international events, are often used to highlight underlying societal issues (Hall 87; Dayan and Katz 211). However, the intensity and generalization observed in *El Watan*'s coverage suggest a form of overextension, where isolated incidents are framed as indicative of systemic national characteristics (Cottle 45). While the inclusion of testimonies and civil society voices provides a veneer of credibility, the selective emphasis on extreme language "hunt for Black people" risks reinforcing sensationalist narratives rather than offering balanced analysis (Cottle 52).

This tendency is further evident in the *Infrastructure as Façade* frame, where Morocco's modern infrastructure is systematically undermined as a façade. This reflects what the literature terms counter-framing, a strategy used to neutralize positive representations by reinterpreting them as superficial or deceptive (Gamson 74). Similar patterns have been identified in studies of international event coverage, where rival media outlets challenge host nations' image-building efforts (Anholt 103). In this sense, AFCON 2025 becomes a symbolic battleground for competing narratives about modernity, legitimacy, and regional leadership (Anholt 119).

Overall, *El Watan*'s coverage is consistent with conflict-oriented framing models, but it also exhibits a high degree of narrative coherence that suggests an underlying ideological position. The convergence of political, social, and symbolic critiques indicates that sport is used as an entry point to articulate broader geopolitical tensions between Morocco and Algeria.

In contrast, *Morocco World News* demonstrates a framing strategy that closely aligns with literature on nation branding and soft power communication. As argued by Joseph Nye, states increasingly use cultural and sporting events to enhance their international image and influence (Nye 11). The depiction of AFCON 2025 as a "benchmark" event reflects this logic, positioning Morocco as a model of development and competence within Africa (Nye 54).

The emphasis on infrastructure, logistics, and international validation corresponds with what Simon Anholt describes as competitive identity construction, where nations seek to differentiate themselves through narratives of modernization and efficiency (Anholt 25). The repeated references to "state-of-the-art stadiums," "high-speed rail," and endorsements from institutions such as the African Union Commission and Confederation of African Football serve to externalize legitimacy, thereby strengthening the credibility of the narrative (Anholt 78).

Importantly, the use of quantitative data (e.g., revenue figures, digital impressions) reflects a technocratic framing style, which is often associated with development discourse (Escobar 4). By grounding claims in measurable outcomes, the coverage constructs an image of objectivity and rational planning (Escobar 56). However, as noted in critical media studies, such data-driven narratives can obscure underlying complexities or downplay negative aspects of events (Couldry and Hepp 112).

The *Soft Power Actor* frame further reinforces this alignment with the literature. The explicit articulation of AFCON as a "tool of soft power" indicates a high level of discursive self-awareness, suggesting that the outlet is not merely reporting events but actively participating in the construction of a national narrative (Nye 107; Melissen 15). This supports findings that domestic media often function as extensions of state communication strategies in contexts of international image-building (Melissen 22).

The *Unfairly Criticized Host* frame, emphasizing resilience against unfair criticism, can be interpreted through the lens of defensive nationalism. Scholars have shown that positive national narratives are frequently accompanied by the delegitimization of external critique, particularly in postcolonial contexts (Anderson 141; Said 36). The reference to an "imperial gaze" reflects this dynamic, aligning with literature that critiques Western media biases while simultaneously reinforcing national cohesion (Said 59). However, this framing also raises questions about journalistic balance. The dismissal of criticism as "baseless" or conspiratorial suggests a limited engagement with alternative perspectives, which may reduce the analytical depth of the coverage (McChesney 73). As with *El Watan*, selective sourcing plays a key role, with institutional voices prioritized over dissenting ones (Herman and Chomsky 2).

When considered together, the findings illustrate a clear case of mirror framing, where two media systems construct opposing narratives using similar discursive strategies (Wolfsfeld 34). Both outlets rely on selective sourcing, evaluative language, and narrative coherence, but they invert the moral and political valence of the same events (Entman, "Framing" 24). Morocco is either a hegemonic manipulator (*El Watan*) or a legitimate leader (*Morocco World News*); AFCON is either a site of political interference or a showcase of excellence (Wolfsfeld 56).

Audience composition deserves consideration as an independent explanation. *Morocco World News*, dependent on international credibility, would likely frame Morocco positively regardless of rivalry, while *El Watan*'s adversarial framing may reflect domestic audience expectations as much as antagonism. Disentangling these fully is beyond this study's scope, but they remain analytically distinct: rivalry explains why Morocco is framed as it is; audience structure explains each outlet's default orientation. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.

This polarization is consistent with research on media in contexts of geopolitical rivalry, where national media serve not only informational but also symbolic and ideological functions

(Voltmer 3; Price 45). The findings also resonate with Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, as both outlets contribute to the construction of national identity by defining the "self" in opposition to the "other" (Anderson 6).

At the same time, the comparison highlights important asymmetries. *El Watan*'s framing is primarily deconstructive, seeking to undermine Morocco's legitimacy, while *Morocco World News* adopts a constructive and promotional approach aimed at reinforcing national prestige (Schudson 89). This asymmetry is reinforced by the relative prevalence of frames within each outlet: *El Watan*'s dominant frame, Morocco's political grip, is primarily oppositional in character, whereas *Morocco World News*'s dominant frame, Africa's benchmark host, is primarily affirmative, meaning that the default register of each outlet's coverage, not merely its occasional commentary, is shaped by these opposing orientations. This difference reflects broader distinctions between critical and celebratory journalism, but it also suggests varying relationships between media and state narratives.

Crucially, neither outlet provides a fully balanced account of AFCON 2025. Instead, both selectively mobilize evidence to support pre-existing narratives, confirming Entman's argument that framing involves both inclusion and exclusion (Entman, Projections 54). This raises important questions about the role of media in shaping public understanding of international events, particularly in regions marked by political tension (Voltmer 187).

In sum, the results strongly align with existing literature on media framing, soft power, and geopolitical communication. Both Moroccan and Algerian media construct AFCON 2025 as more than a sporting event, embedding it within broader narratives of power, identity, and legitimacy. However, the stark contrast between the two outlets underscores the extent to which media representations are shaped by national context and political positioning, resulting in highly polarized and ideologically driven coverage.

Limitations

Several scope conditions shape how these findings should be read. The 25-article corpus, drawn from one outlet per country, reflects the framing tendencies of *El Watan* and *Morocco World News* specifically rather than the broader Algerian and Moroccan media landscapes, and cannot fully isolate geopolitical rivalry from audience structure as competing explanations. The *El Watan* corpus also draws heavily on three contributors, so identified frames may partly reflect individual columnist voices. Finally, the analysis involved translation of French-language material and a two-month window centered on tournament coverage, both of which the author approached with sustained attention to interpretive precision and reflexivity given his Moroccan background. These considerations point toward productive directions for future research.

Conclusion

El Watan and *Morocco World News* offer sharply contrasting portrayals of Morocco's hosting of AFCON 2025. *El Watan* frames the event critically, emphasizing political manipulation, social tension, and modernity as façade, while *Morocco World News* presents Morocco as a model host, highlighting organizational success and resilience against criticism. These opposing narrative priorities, one questioning Morocco's legitimacy, the other reinforcing it, align with existing literature showing that mega-event coverage reflects political context rather than neutral reporting. Both outlets rely on selective sourcing, evaluative language, and coherent narrative structures, with *El Watan*'s adversarial approach and *Morocco World News*'s promotional discourse together illustrating how sport becomes a vehicle for political messaging.

AFCON 2025 thus emerges as a site of competing narratives about power, identity, and legitimacy in the Maghreb, demonstrating how media framing can reinforce national perspectives and deepen regional divides. Future research could explore audience interpretation of these narratives or whether alternative media spaces challenge such polarized representations.

This study makes important contributions. First, it articulates a mirror framing dynamic: rather than simple counter-framing, the two outlets deploy identical discursive instruments (selective sourcing, moralizing language, external validation) to reach opposed conclusions about the same actors and events, suggesting framing under deep rivalry is structurally conditioned rather than a purely journalistic choice. Second, it extends soft power and nation branding frameworks beyond host-to-external-audience communication, showing this logic also operates inward, where a rival outlet's counter-framing mirrors and inverts the host's brand-building strategy.

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