



Beyond the Game - How Mega Football Events Shape the Destination Image of the United States

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Abstract:

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Mega football events play an increasingly significant role in shaping international perceptions of host countries. Although existing research demonstrates that tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup can influence destination image through media exposure, symbolic place-making, and safety management, most studies concentrate on European contexts. This dissertation explores how mega football events shape global visitors' perceptions of the United States as a tourism destination. A qualitative exploratory approach was employed, using 23 semi-structured interviews and analysis of written user-generated content, including 22 blogs and online articles. The findings indicate that mega football events generally reinforce a positive image of the United States, particularly regarding organizational capacity and large-scale event production. Nevertheless, this favorable perception is tempered by concerns related to safety, crowd management, and media-amplified narratives, resulting in an ambivalent destination image. Cultural differences in football consumption further shape expectations, with atmosphere and authenticity perceived as primarily generated by international communities rather than the host nation. By integrating individual perspectives and media tourism narratives, this study contributes to destination image theory by highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which mega football events influence the host country's image, providing insights relevant to tourism research and mega-event destination management.

Keywords: Fan Travel, North America, Football Tourism, Sporting Events

Resumo:

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Os megaeventos desportivos de futebol desempenham um papel cada vez mais significativo na formação das perceções internacionais sobre os países anfitriões. Embora a investigação existente demonstre que torneios como a Taça do Mundo da FIFA podem influenciar a imagem do destino por meio da exposição mediática e da construção simbólica do lugar, a maioria dos estudos concentra-se em contextos europeus. Esta dissertação explora como os megaeventos de futebol moldam as perceções dos visitantes internacionais sobre os Estados Unidos como destino turístico. Adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, recorrendo a 23 entrevistas semiestruturadas e à análise de conteúdo gerado por utilizadores, nomeadamente 22 blogs e artigos online. Os resultados indicam que os megaeventos de futebol tendem a reforçar uma imagem positiva dos Estados Unidos, sobretudo quanto à capacidade organizacional e à produção de eventos de grande escala. No entanto, esta perceção favorável é moderada por preocupações relacionadas com a segurança, a gestão de multidões e as narrativas mediáticas amplificadas, resultando numa imagem de destino ambivalente. As diferenças culturais na vivência do futebol influenciam igualmente as expectativas, sendo a atmosfera e a autenticidade associadas sobretudo às comunidades internacionais de adeptos, mais do que ao país anfitrião. Ao integrar perspetivas individuais e narrativas turísticas mediadas pelos meios de comunicação, este estudo contribui para a teoria da imagem do destino, evidenciando o papel complexo que os megaeventos de futebol desempenham na construção da imagem do país anfitrião, oferecendo contributos relevantes para a investigação em turismo e para a gestão de destinos associados a megaeventos.

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List of Abbreviations

This List provides the meaning of all abbreviations and acronyms used throughout the thesis.

Abbreviation	Full meaning
CONCACAF	Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football
CONMEBOL	Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol (South American Football Confederation)
DMO	Destination Marketing Organization
EPL	English Premier League
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
Liga MX	Mexican top-tier football league (Liga Mexicana de Fútbol)
MLS	Major League Soccer
UGC	User-Generated Content
U.S.	United States

1. Introduction:

Board topic

Sports tourism has been widely recognized as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the travel economy, used as a destination strategy and not as a secondary activity. Research shows that events are an essential element of a destination's offer and are used by DMOs (Destination Marketing Organizations) to reinforce and differentiate their product, in this case, the destination country (Jurišić Mustapić & Marušić, 2023).

Within event tourism, football has become a strong tourism attractor. Football stadiums and clubs serve as signs of authenticity that can attract investment and drive tourism (Wilson, 2022). The magnitude is significant: in 2019, 1.5 million incoming visitors to the UK watched live football, spending €1.6 billion and accounting for five percent of all inbound spend (VisitBritain, 2021).

Specific topic

The United States provides a suitable context for the study of football tourism. This country will host the 2026 FIFA World Cup, allocated across 16 cities, and is expected to create unusual mobility and tourism flows. For example, projections for the Cascadia corridor (a cross-border mega-region connected by trade, travel, and culture) estimate between 400,000 and 750,000 additional visitors in Seattle and up to 900,000 in Vancouver (Border Policy Research Institute, 2024). In addition, MLS and Liga MX have become well-known platforms for football consumption in North America, with continuous growth in global fan engagement. (Romero-Jara et al., 2024; Cho, Chiu, & Tan, 2020).

Research Gap

Although research on sports tourism has grown, it remains concentrated in Europe, particularly in the UK. For instance, McManus (2020) examines football tourism practices in the European context, while studies in North America are limited. Monterrubio (2016) highlights the lack of research on the sociocultural impacts of sports event tourism and the lack of comparative analyses across North America; Cho, Chiu, and Tan (2020) investigate the motivations of international fans, including identity and nostalgia; Romero-Jara (2024) studied digital engagement across different football leagues, including MLS. However, these studies almost never link behavior to destination image or tourism. As shown earlier, reports prepared by the Border Policy Research Institute (2024) for the 2026 FIFA World Cup highlight logistical and regulatory challenges across sectors. This signals the need for research comparing the impacts of mega-events and local leagues on football tourism in North America. Although existing studies have explored the role of mega-events in forming destination image, research focusing on the United States remains limited. This gap shows the need to explore how past and upcoming tournaments, such as the Copa America 2024 and the FIFA World Cup 2026, may influence perceptions of the U.S. as a tourism destination. This unresolved gap leads directly to the Research Question and Objectives of this study, which focus on understanding how mega football events influence perceptions of the United States as a Tourism destination.

Research question:

RQ1: How do mega football events shape international visitors' perceptions and the destination image of the United States?

Research objectives

Objective 1: To identify and interpret the main factors shaping international visitors' and football fans' perceptions of the United States as a tourism destination in relation to mega football events.

Objective 2: To examine how public discussions and media narratives surrounding mega football events influence perceptions of the United States as a tourism destination.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, presents the research question and objectives, and lays out the research gap that motivates the study. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on sports mega-events, destination image, and the United States as a tourism destination, integrating multiple perspectives on how football events influence visitor perceptions. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, describing the qualitative and exploratory research design, the data collection procedure, and the thematic analysis adopted for the analysis of the material. Chapter 4 presents the results, synthesizing findings from interviews and online narratives and highlighting the main themes. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to the literature review. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by recapping the key contributions, limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the primary literature surrounding mega football events and their influence on destination image, with a specific focus on the United States. It examines how large-scale sporting events function as tools for tourism development and soft power, highlighting the role of safety perception and media narratives in shaping international trust. The following sections examine mega football events globally and in the U.S. context, before exploring how destination image is formed and sustained through such experiences.

2.1 Mega Football Events

Mega-events are large-scale events that attract international attention, participation, and substantial investment in promotion and infrastructure. They are generally defined as one-time events of remarkable magnitude that have substantial consequences for the host city or nation's reputation, visibility, and economic impact (Getz & Page, 2016). The Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup are examples of this type of event, among many others, which serve as both sporting competitions and tools for urban transformation and place. Mega-events are driven by

global displays or “modern media spectacles” that influence both international perceptions and the host destination's national identity. In response to such events, it is essential to have public investment, long-term planning, and the participation of a broad range of stakeholders, including local businesses, governments, and international organizations (Müller et al., 2022). Beyond their entertainment value, mega-events are also seen as excellent tools for boosting a country's global image, tourism, creating social and economic legacies that go beyond the event. Thus, mega sporting events play a crucial role in sport tourism development by enhancing infrastructure and boosting visitor numbers (Iangngap & Raizada, 2020).

Among all types of mega-events, football tournaments, like the FIFA World Cup, are considered the most influential in forming global tourism and the evolution of destinations. Football holds a unique status as the world's most popular sport, attracting billions of viewers and driving international fan mobility that few other sports can match (McManus, 2020). For instance, Rozhda and Sheresheva (2021) study Russia's FIFA World Cup and highlight that such events are not only significant celebrations but also wide-reaching opportunities for host countries to promote their national image and improve their position in the tourism market. Their findings show that the World Cup served as a vehicle for improving Russia's international reputation by presenting its hospitality, safety, and culture. Mega football events transform cities into temporary global stages, reconfiguring them to accommodate large numbers of tourists and deliver safe, controlled experiences for travelers (Duignan et al., 2021).

Mega football events have been known for a long time to trigger economic and tourism development in host countries, generating significant short and long-term benefits. From a tourism perspective, they attract millions of people, driving spending across different sectors such as entertainment, hospitality, and transport, positioning destinations as globally recognized travel destinations (Rozhda & Sheresheva, 2021). However, the socioeconomic outcomes of this level of events are not always positive. Mega-events can also create inequalities, reinforce spatial segregation, and provide short-term tourism benefits that decline after the event ends (Monterrubio, 2016). Event organizers commonly prioritize global image and safety management over community engagement, leading to “controlled urban experiences” that can limit interactions between residents and tourists (Duignan, et al.2021).

In addition to their economic significance, mega football events have become a principal instrument for place branding and destination marketing. Studies agree that these events

provide host countries with a unique opportunity to improve their international visibility and to shape and reinforce their desired national image (Duignan et al., 2021). Now, in the English Premier League, clubs have developed stadium tours, match-day experiences, and museums as tourist attractions, demonstrating how football settings can be leveraged to create place appeal (Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022). Reports indicate a significant number of football-related visits and spending in the UK, suggesting that football experiences, whether tied to distinctive events or local leagues, can support tourism promotion and national image (VisitBritain, 2021). Looking forward to North America, they anticipate similar opportunities. Research for the 2026 World Cup emphasizes visitor management and cross-border flows as part of their overall plan to present host countries and cities as prepared and efficient destinations (Border Policy Research Institute, 2024).

These events are also social and experiential, generating powerful emotions and communal meanings for both visitors and residents (Molla et al., 2021). Football mega-events transform everyday locations into temporary, energetic communities where fans engage in standard practices such as celebrations and manifestations of identity (Duignan, 2021). This social dimension contributes to the symbolic value and feeling of belonging that characterize football tourism from other forms of travel. Many fans view attendance at such events as a form of devotional practice, in which emotional connection to teams and cities leads to long-term loyalty and repeat visits (Cho et al., 2020). Furthermore, football spaces such as fan zones, stadiums, and city landmarks acquire historical importance, becoming sites of memory that visitors seek to witness directly, producing not only economic and visual benefits but also intangible legacies (Wilson, 2022). However, these social benefits depend on inclusive experiences and authentic interactions between international and local fans, which can be obstructed when event management place excessive emphasis on security and control (Monterrubio, 2016).

2.1.1 Safety Perceptions During Mega Football Events

Safety perception has become one of the most critical factors shaping travel behavior in modern tourism, especially during large-scale sporting events. Studies consistently show that tourists' ratings of safety conditions influence levels of engagement and satisfaction during travel, and, most importantly, destination choice (Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022). Perceived risk has been

shown to act as a significant psychological barrier, reducing travelers' willingness to participate. In contrast, a positive perception of safety and involvement increases emotional attachment to the destination. Safety is a key component of affective and cognitive destination image, directly shaping tourists' emotional judgments and long-term loyalty (Johan et al., 2021). The way safety is managed enhances destination competitiveness, particularly in the sport tourism sector, where crowd density and uncertainty are essential (Mollah et al., 2021). Experimental evidence supports the view that a good perception of safety is one of the most decisive motivational factors for visitors attending major events, typically outweighing convenience or price (Abdollahi et al., 2024). Post-event evaluation of Russia's 2018 World Cup demonstrates that well-communicated safety standards can enhance the national image by highlighting organization and security as dominant factors shaping tourists' impressions (Rozhda & Sheresheva, 2021).

Mega-events rely heavily on complex safety management systems that aim to minimize physical risk while maximizing tourists' confidence. We often observe that event operations and urban planning treat safety as a form of experience design, with surveillance and crowd-flow control designed to protect participants and communicate order and reliability. For example, at the Rio 2026 Games, organizers created closely managed "double bubble" areas that kept visitors inside easily monitored, secure zones. This strategy reduced stress but also restricted interaction with the day-to-day city (Duignan et al., 2021). Similar dynamics are observed in Latin America, where major sporting events in Mexico often rely on heavy policing and spatial segregation to ensure tourist security, thereby unintentionally limiting community involvement and local ownership of the event (Monterrubio, 2016). Fans value immersion in local atmospheres and participation in rituals that reveal the emotional core of football culture (Cho et al., 2020). Coordinated security protocols among Canada, the United States, and Mexico emphasize consistent border procedures and shared crisis-response frameworks to foster regional security (The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup Games: Implications for cross-border travel in Cascadia, n.d.). Also, transparent communication about safety measures is as important as the measures themselves, since visibility and clarity of security protocols increase visitors' trust (McCarthy, 2024). Additionally, destinations with a strong reputation for stability attract more repeat visitors (Abdollahi et al., 2024).

Returning to the North American context, traveler confidence in cross-border safety and efficient management will be crucial to encourage movement between Mexico, the United

States, and Canada (The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup Games: Implications for cross-border travel in Cascadia, n.d.).

2.1.2 Mega Football Events in the United States

The United States has progressively consolidated its role as a leading international venue for high-profile football tournaments, utilizing these events to improve its reputation as a secure, profitable, and efficient host. The trajectory began with the 1994 FIFA World Cup, which achieved record-breaking attendance and marked the U.S. introduction into global football culture, laying the groundwork for sport-related tourism and professional league development (Goldman et al., 2017). Later tournaments, such as the 2016 Copa América Centenario and the 1999 Women's World Cup, further strengthened the country's organizational credibility, demonstrating its ability to manage large-scale international events and attract significant visitor flows. More recently, the Copa America 2024, organized across multiple U.S. cities, has been framed as part of a strategic effort to extend the tournament's influence while leveraging the United States' commercial market and infrastructure (CONMEBOL, 2025). At the same time, the restructuring of regional competitions has focused on rebuilding trust and expanding cross-border tournaments centered in the U.S., thereby reinforcing the U.S.'s regional leadership. This historical progression culminates in the upcoming 2026 World Cup, positioning the country as the symbolic core of football's growing presence in North America (Wise & Ludvigsen, 2021).

Football mega-events hosted in the United States have gradually operated as platforms for regional integration across America. The collaboration between CONCACAF and CONMEBOL reflects a deliberate strategy to merge competitive structures and expand commercial and cultural cooperation throughout the continent (CONMEBOL, 2025). This process imitates the broader repositioning of CONCACAF, which sought to rebuild governance transparency and credibility through cross-border tournaments and partnerships centered in the U.S. (Goldman et al., 2017). Hosting tournaments such as the Copa America in the United States' territory serves as a form of regional diplomacy, reinforcing mutual trust and strengthening the country's leadership in football event administration. This strategy aligns with the perspective that positions mega-events as instruments for projecting international visibility and national identity (Alshikhy et al., 2025). Related dynamics are evident in the

planning for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, where a tri-national collaboration among Mexico, the United States, and Canada symbolizes political coordination and cross-border infrastructure integration (The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup Games, 2023). These events operate as channels of urban sensitivity, reinforcing intragovernmental relations and supporting host nations as international actors in the world of sport and tourism (Müller et al., 2022).

The organizational credibility of the United States as a host of football mega-events is supported by its coordination capacity between the public and private sectors and strong legal structure (Müller et al., 2022). This collaboration among institutions has been a defining feature of the U.S. approach to managing mega-events and has contributed to its perception as a reliable and stable host country. The host city agreements for the 2026 FIFA World Cup demonstrate how risk management and accountability have become central to event organization, with security procedures and operational liabilities (Sroka, 2025). When integrated with safety and crisis management systems, these practices reinforce both the host country's reputation and visitor confidence (McCarthy, 2024). This organizational efficiency and leadership align with broader international trends in mega-event administration, which signals transparency as a key source of legitimacy (Goldman et al., 2017).

The upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup represents a crucial moment for the United States to solidify its reputation as a premier global tourism and event destination. Framed under the concept of "*United 2026*", the tournament expands beyond sport, symbolizing openness, collaboration, and shared values among the host country (Wise & Ludvigsen, 2021). This image of large-scale cooperation and unity serves as a dynamic form of soft diplomacy, reinforcing the U.S. capacity to organize secure and inclusive international events, also advocating its cultural diversity and infrastructure solidity (Alshikhy et al., 2025). The tri-national format of this event also creates opportunities to improve the region's tourism appeal by enabling cross-border travel, promoting integrated visitor experiences, and expanding transportation networks across North America (The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup Games, 2023). For the United States in particular, the World Cup provides an international platform to confirm its leadership in sports governance and global hospitality, building on its proven record of operational success and safety management (CONMEBOL, 2025). Beyond logistics, previous studies highlight that well-executed mega-events can transform international perceptions of host nations, enhancing their positive image of efficiency and modernity. The 2026 World Cup is therefore expected to serve as a perceptual and diplomatic milestone,

positioning the U.S. at the center of football's global stage while boosting its destination image for years to come (Rozhda & Sheresheva, 2021).

While the diplomatic and organizational relevance of football mega-events in the U.S. has been extensively documented, their long-term effects on tourist perception and destination image remain understudied. Existing research primarily focuses on economic outcomes, governance reforms, and infrastructure development (Müller et al., 2022). Still, the symbolic and emotional dimensions of how these events shape global perceptions of the United States are often overlooked. Other studies on mega-events have shown that visitor experiences, urban branding, and media narratives significantly affect the post-event destination image (Abdollahi et al., 2024).

2.2 Destination Image

Destination Image is the set of perceptions and beliefs that tourists hold about a place, shaping their behavioral intentions and travel-related decisions. Emami et al. (2023) define destination image as a multidimensional construct formed by visitors' evaluations of cultural, environmental, and service-related elements. Their findings indicate that travelers' impressions are not entirely visual or physical but are also symbolic and psychological, combining tangible experiences with emotional reviews.

In parallel, destination image is one of the strongest predictors of tourist behavior, exhibiting a consistent positive relationship with satisfaction and revisit intentions across empirical studies (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Building on Afshardoost & Eshaghi's meta-analysis, the study consistently emphasizes that destination image is formed by three correlated dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative. The cognitive dimension concerns tourists' knowledge and beliefs about the destination's attributes, such as attractions, infrastructure, and safety. While the affective dimension reflects feelings and emotional responses associated with the place, the conative dimension corresponds to behavioral intentions, including the likelihood of visiting the destination. Within sports tourism, these dimensions interact through personal experience, the media, and marketing. Studies of mega-events, such as the FIFA World Cup, show that large-scale sports events reinforce both cognitive and affective perceptions through experimental engagement and extensive media coverage (Rozhda & Sheresheva, 2021).

The process by which destination image is formed involves a complex exchange among personal experiences, information sources, and environmental distinctiveness, complemented by infrastructure, cultural traditions, attractions, service quality, among others. These dimensions stipulate that visitors form their perspectives through both emotional responses to hospitality and culture and rational evaluations of facilities (Emami et al., 2023). Mega-events serve as international communication platforms through which host destinations are intentionally rebranded through visual storytelling and infrastructure renewal. At the same time, event designs can shape tourists' perceptions of the host destination environment (Müller et al., 2022). Football events serve as cultural narratives that connect identity, place, and sport, helping to communicate and construct a specific version of local authenticity (Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022).

2.2.1 Destination Image of the United States

The destination image has progressively evolved from a promotional concept to a central element of how countries communicate and manage their global identity. It functions as a dimension of soft power, enabling nations to project political stability, cultural distinctiveness, and social values through media and tourism, rather than through traditional diplomacy (Alshikhy et al., 2025). This strategic use of image allows destinations to form expectations and influence perceptions before the travel experience itself, turning branding into a long-term system instrument (Wang et al., 2023). The effectiveness of destination branding relies on the capacity to create emotional engagement between perceptions of tourism and national identity, integrating political, economic, and cultural dimensions into a cohesive external narrative (Huang et al., 2021).

In this international context, the United States has positioned its destination image as a key pillar of its nation-branding agenda. “Brand America” extends beyond the promotion of tourist landmarks; it conveys ideas of diversity, freedom, and innovation that align with the nation’s historical self-representation (Huang et al., 2022). Cultural and sporting events serve as obvious instruments for conveying this identity globally, transforming entertainment into a medium of reputation management (Wise & Ludvigsen, 2021). Studies on sports diplomacy further reveal that mega-events provide countries with opportunities to frame themselves as competent and culturally influential hosts, elements that contribute directly to the cognitive and affective

components of the destination image (CONMEBOL, 2025; CONCACAF, 2017). Alongside these large-scale events, the U.S. mobilizes its infrastructure, media systems, and entertainment power to gain global recognition, reinforce trust in its brand narrative, and keep tourist interest (Jebbouri et al., 2023).

The United States' destination image is shaped by cultural symbolism, global media exposure, and its role as a leading international force in entertainment and innovation. Destination image often reflects a country's strategic efforts to align its image with its political and cultural diversity, a process clearly evident in the U.S. promotion of values such as diversity, freedom, and opportunity through tourism communication (Huang et al., 2022). Yet, Dubinsky (2023) emphasizes that "Brand America" carries implicit contradictions. While praised for its global leadership, entertainment, and innovation, the United States also faces criticism for safety concerns and political polarization. These perceptions of doubt affect the level of trust tourists place in the country as a destination. Practical research confirms that trust moderates the relationship between image and satisfaction, highlighting that even destinations with strong recognition, such as the U.S., must ensure safety and authenticity to maintain long-term appeal (Jebbouri et al., 2023). The digital environment intensifies these dynamics, as social media narratives increasingly form public perceptions. User-generated content (UGC), like blogs, articles and social media, reveals ongoing associations between American destinations and concepts such as entertainment, modernity, and freedom, reflecting both the volatility and strength of the U.S. image (Lin et al., 2021). Evidence from event-based research further demonstrates that well-managed events magnify perceived safety and hospitality, reinforcing a nation's credibility in the tourism market (Wise & Ludvigsen, 2021).

Football mega-events have become one of the most visible channels through which the U.S. constructs and magnifies its global image. Hosting tournaments such as the Copa América 2024 and the 2026 FIFA World Cup enables the country to integrate culture and sport into a unified narrative of competence and openness (City of Toronto, 2023). The United 2026 project has been designed as a symbol of North American cooperation and a testament to stability and inclusivity in the post-COVID era (Lin et al., 2021). From a regional perspective, CONMEBOL (2025) highlights the benefits of collaboration with CONCACAF, which extends beyond sports, promoting the United States as an organizational and logistical leader capable of delivering globally visible and safe tournaments.

Major events also serve as mechanisms of influence, allowing host nations to reframe their international image. They serve as diplomatic platforms where countries showcase their efficiency, reliability, and cultural openness (Alshikhy et al., 2025). For the U.S., these tournaments project Brand America's key values toward global audiences while strengthening its reputation for high-quality event management (Dubinsky, 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine how mega football events affect the United States' destination image. A qualitative approach is adequate for this research because perception and destination image are intrinsically subjective, shaped by narratives, emotions, and personal or collective experiences. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate when the objective is to uncover meaning, personal evaluations, and interpretations, which aligns with recent destination-image and sport-tourism research (Gorji et al., 2022; Kokolaki, 2025; Duignan et al., 2021).

The study applies two complementary qualitative methods: (1) semi-structured interviews, and (2) the analysis of user-generated content (UGC) from digital platforms. Using two different qualitative sources strengthens the study, as interviews capture individual viewpoints while UGC reflects broader public narratives (Kaikkonen, 2016). The combination of these two sources enhances both the depth and the credibility of the findings (Gorji et al., 2022; Kaikkonen, 2016). The semi-structured interview directly addresses the main Research Question and Research Objective 1, capturing individual perspectives on the U.S. as a tourism destination in the context of mega football events. On the other hand, the written UGC is directed to Research Objective 2 by showing how public discussions and online narratives portray the United States during these events. As a result, they provide a flexible yet rigorous framework for examining how mega football events are critical in shaping and transforming the U.S. destination image.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

This study employs a non-probabilistic purposive and convenience sampling to select interview participants and UGC, aiming to access information-rich cases that offer diverse perspectives on the topic.

3.2.1 Interview Participants

For the interview component, participants were recruited from individuals familiar with recent or upcoming mega events in the United States, as well as those who follow international football. The inclusion criterion of participants was at least 18 years old, from different parts of the world, providing sufficient diversity and depth of perspectives while remaining feasible within the available time frame.

3.2.2 Blog Sampling

For the Blog component, a purposive sample of publicly available blog posts was collected from recognized digital sources. Using travel blog narratives to evaluate destination image, content was selected based on relevance to football, tourism, and the U.S. destination perspective (Kaikkonen, 2016), additionally, emphasizing how blog entries can reflect the cognitive and affective dimensions of a destination image, which justifies their inclusion as qualitative data (Tseng, 2015). The goal is to compile a dataset of 20–25 blog posts, consistent with existing qualitative tourism studies, in which medium-sized samples are considered sufficient to identify stable thematic patterns without compromising depth. This range was selected to ensure thematic saturation while preserving interpretative richness, as prior research indicates that destination-image narratives can be meaningfully analyzed using a focused corpus of textual material.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily online through different platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was transcribed to ensure accuracy in the detailed post-analysis. The conversations followed a flexible guide designed around the main themes. Perceptions of the United States as a football host, expectations toward mega football events, and safety or cultural impressions related to tourism.

User-Generated Content (UGC). This data source consisted of publicly available blogs, specifically selected for their relevance to football tourism and destination perception. Posts were identified through keywords and search filters such as “United 2026”, “Mega football events in the U.S.”, “World Cup 2026”, among others. The collection focused on content that reacts to, promotes, or discusses major football events hosted in the United States, including posts that also reflect on perceptions of the country as a football or travel destination (Kaikkonen, 2016; Tseng, 2015).

Interview Protocol and Procedure

The semi-structured interview followed a pre-defined outline to ensure consistency while maintaining flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The guide was divided into two groups, reflecting key aspects of the research topic: (I) mega-events and U.S. perceptions; (II) event experience and destination image. The structure was inspired by the literature review and the frameworks for qualitative tourism research to capture event expectations, experiences, and perceptions.

STRUCTURE	ADAPTED QUESTIONS
<p>DESTINATION IMAGE OF THE UNITED STATES IN RELATION TO MEGA-FOOTBALL EVENTS</p>	<p>Group I - Mega-Event football events in the U.S. <i>(based on Shazly, 2022; Jiang et al., 2023; Frochot, 2012)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe your general interest in Mega football events (e.g., casual viewer, regular follower, devoted fan)? • What do you usually associate with the United States in the context of sport and tourism? <p>• When you think of upcoming football mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup 2026 or Copa América 2024, what comes to mind first about the United States as a host?</p> <p>• Before these events were announced, how would you have described the U.S. as a tourism destination?</p> <p>• How do you imagine the experience of attending a mega football event in the United States would differ from other countries (e.g., Europe or South America)?</p>

Group II Visitors perceptions

- What expectations do you have about how these events might change your perception of the country?
- Which aspects of the U.S. as a host (infrastructure, safety, culture, organization) do you believe would most influence your experience?

Group III– US Destination Image (*Martins, 2015; Gorji et al., 2022; Sharafudding et al., 2021*)

- What positive feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

What negative feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

- In your opinion, how might hosting these events affect the U.S’ image as a tourism destination globally?
- What characteristics or values do you think the U.S. projects through these events (e.g., diversity, innovation, safety, culture)?
- Do you think online content (blogs, media coverage, or fan articles) influences how people perceive the U.S. as a destination?

How?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about how you perceive the United States as a destination for football tourism?

SCREENING

- Demographics: Age, Gender, Country of Residence
- Experience with travel or football events (e.g., Have you ever attended a major football event?)

Table 1: Interview guide based on literature

Source: Own elaboration, 2025

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data was examined using thematic content analysis, a method commonly employed in qualitative research to identify meanings and patterns within written content

(Gorji et al., 2022; Kokolaki, 2025). This approach enables the identification of recurring perceptions, attitudes, and ideas within the material, highlighting how participants and online audiences perceive the U.S. as a host of major football events.

Comparing interview findings and online content helped identify consistent or contrasting opinions between digital narratives and direct experiences. This combined analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how mega football events shape the United States' destination image, thereby enhancing the credibility of the results through cross-verification of themes across different data types.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All procedures in this study were adhered to the ethical principles established in the *Declaration of Helsinki* for research involving human participants (World Medical Association, 2013). Interview participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose. Consent was obtained prior to the commencement of each interview, and participants' identities were kept anonymous. Audio recordings were stored securely and deleted after transcription and analysis.

For the user-generated content analysis, only publicly available posts were used. Usernames or profiles were removed to protect the privacy of online users and to avoid traceability.

4. Results

This chapter presents the experimental findings obtained from a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews with international football fans and a complementary thematic analysis of online travel blogs and digital content.

Section 4.1 presents findings from the interview data, capturing international fans' perceptions, expectations, and comparisons, shaped by personal experience and cultural background. Section 4.2 reports findings from the blog analysis, which reflect broader public narratives, media-influenced representations, and tourism-related discussions surrounding major football events in the United States. Findings were analyzed thematically and are presented below according to the identified key themes.

Each theme is supported by representative interpretations derived from the interview and blog-generated concept maps and theme summaries.

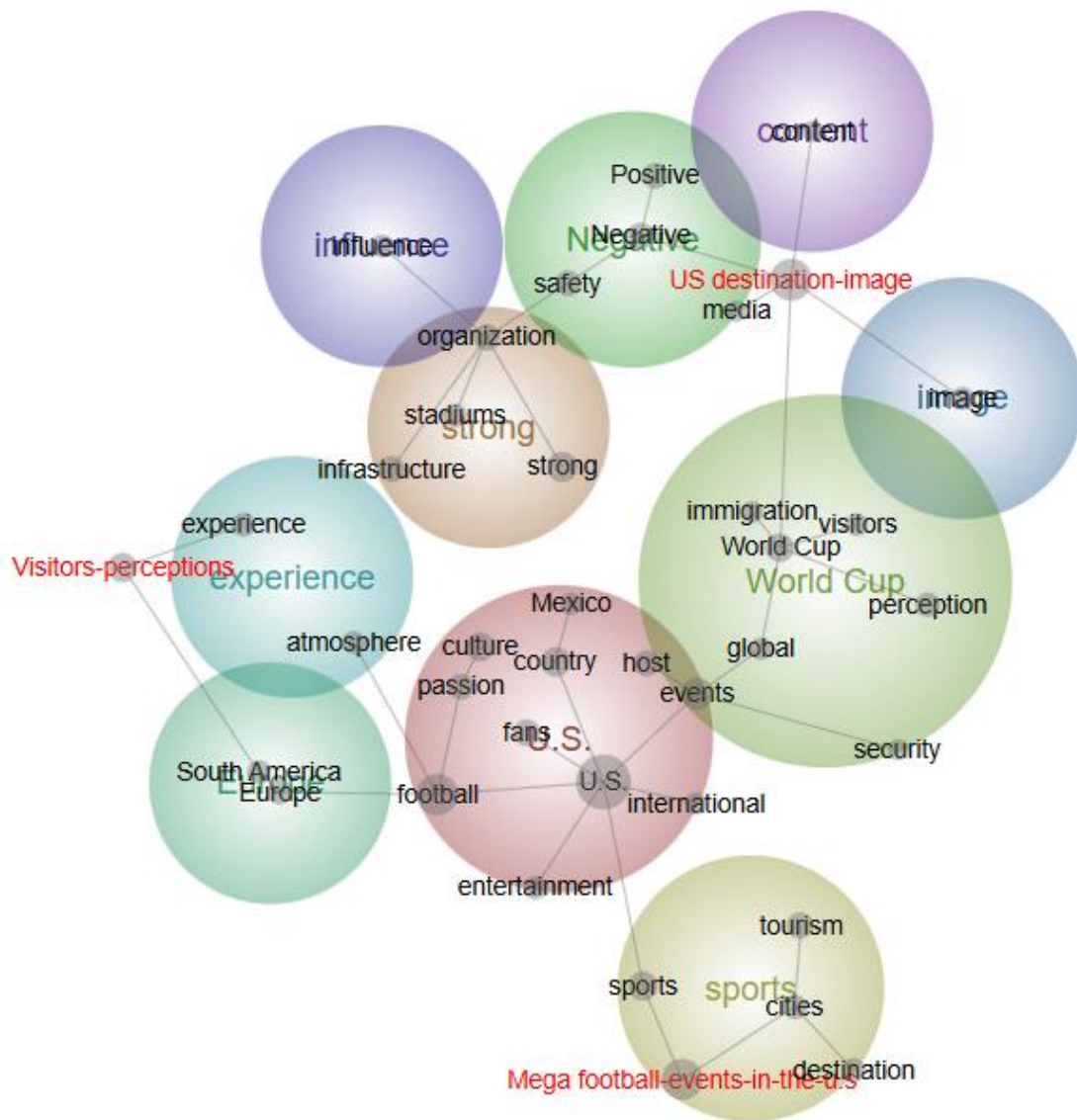


Figure 2. Concept Map of Key Themes Emerging from Interview Data

Source: Based on interview data analyzed using Leximancer

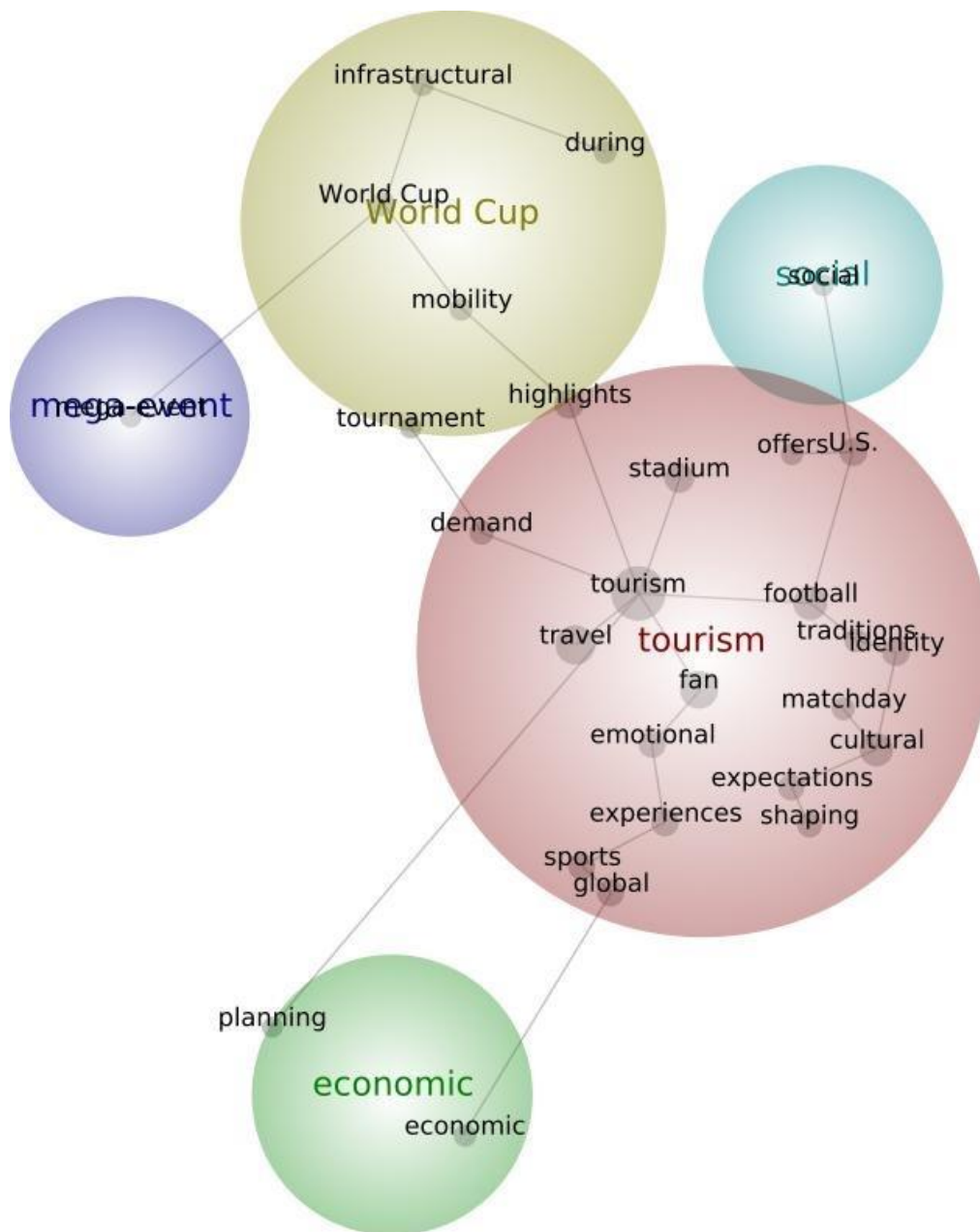


Figure 3. Concept Map of Key Themes Emerging from Blog Data

Source: Based on blog data analyzed using Leximancer.

4.1 Interview Findings

This section presents the results of qualitative interviews with international football fans. The findings examine how interviewees perceive the United States as a host destination for major football events, how these perceptions are shaped by prior football experiences, and how cultural and contextual factors influence expectations regarding the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

4.1.1 Perceived U.S. Organization & Infrastructure

Across the interviews, the U.S. was frequently associated with strong organization, advanced infrastructure, and efficiency. Participants highlighted that the United States is “good at organizing large events”, referencing past experiences with concerts and NFL games, among others. Stadiums were described as technologically advanced and modern, suggesting a belief that the country is logistically prepared to receive an event as massive as the 2026 World Cup.

Despite this overall confidence, some interviewees expressed doubts about the suitability of U.S. stadiums for football events. Concerns included pitch dimensions, viewing angles, and the perceived distance between spectators and the field, reflecting the fact that many stadiums were initially designed for American football. However, these issues were framed more as uncertainties rather than strong criticisms.

4.1.2 Safety, Security & Negative Associations

Safety unfolded as one of the clearest and most emotionally charged themes, with security concerns being frequently mentioned, including crowd management issues, gun violence, and general perceptions of the U.S. as a country with “safety problems”. These topics often contrasted intensely with participants’ experiences in Europe and South America, where football may be more chaotic in terms of atmosphere but is perceived as more controllable due to established management practices, including themes such as fears related to weapons, concerns about police responses, uncertainty about “how the United States will manage Latin American fan passion,” and doubts in the country’s ability to control crowds. Interestingly, safety concerns did not prevent interviewees from wanting to attend matches but rather fostered cautious optimism, in which the event is seen as attractive but potentially risky.

4.1.3 Atmosphere, Passion & Cultural Comparison

Interviewees brought special attention to cultural differences in how football is experienced. U.S. sports culture, described as more entertainment-driven and commercial, was contrasted with South American or European football culture, which was described as emotional, passionate, intense, and “alive”. Comments such as “The U.S. does not have the same football passion,” “It feels more like entertainment,” “Latin American fans bring the atmosphere,”

“Europeans have tradition, Americans have shown” reflect participants expectations of World Cup crowds to be influenced not by American fans but by international visitors, who will bring authentic football culture to the atmosphere of the event. As a result, the quality of the experience is primarily associated with the global fan base travelling to the events, rather than with the host country.

4.1.4 Event Expectations & Public Narratives

Interviewees expressed high expectations and strong enthusiasm for the 2026 World Cup, anticipating a global environment, high levels of entertainment, a very “Americanized” event experience, large-scale production value, fan zones, concerts, and innovative city activation. Visitors expect the United States to make the event into something “spectacular, big, and polished”, even if it is not traditionally football authentic. Additionally, the U.S. is considered as an attractive destination for tourism, with diverse landmarks, cities, and urban experiences that can be explored during the event.

Media narratives were identified as a key factor shaping expectations. Participants referred to global representations of U.S. immigration policies, political tensions, and security incidents, noting that these narratives influenced perceptions of safety and crowd management. Interviewees also acknowledged differences between U.S. domestic media framing and international media coverage, which contributed to uncertainty about the actual World Cup experience.

4.2 Blogs Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of online travel blogs and digital content related to football events in the United States. The blog data provide insight into broader public discourse, tourism-oriented narratives, and media-influenced interpretations of the United States as a mega-event host.

4.2.1 Infrastructure, Mobility, and Urban Capacity

Blogs strongly reinforced perceptions of the United States as a country with large-scale, technologically sophisticated infrastructure. Stadiums were frequently described as

“futuristic,” “spectacular,” and capable of handling large crowds. Writers highlighted the scale of the U.S. venues and their ability to host multiple simultaneous events.

At the same time, blogs raised concerns about urban mobility, transportation congestion, and the pressure on public transit systems during mega-events. Several posts emphasized the need for coordinated transport planning, accommodation capacity, and inter-city mobility to manage the expected number of international visitors during the World Cup.

4.2.2 Safety, Crowd Management, and Risk Perceptions

Safety concerns were intensified in the blog corpus, particularly through incidents during the Copa América 2024. Blog narratives frequently mentioned overcrowding, fans breaking into stadiums, overwhelmed police forces, ticketed spectators being denied entry, violent altercations between fan groups, and heat-related medical emergencies.

These incidents shaped online sentiment and contributed to negative perceptions of the United States' security protocols for football fan cultures. While infrastructure was generally considered sufficient, blogs emphasized that effective crowd management and culturally appropriate security practices would be critical to the success of the 2026 World Cup.

4.2.3 Matchday Atmosphere, Fan Culture, and Experience

Blogs placed strong emphasis on matchday atmosphere as a central component of the sports tourism experience. Writers also described fan zones, bars, public screenings, and street celebrations as essential spaces where emotional connection and national identity were expressed. Long queues, singing, and communal celebrations during Copa América were frequently cited as defining elements of the event experience.

These narratives reinforce the idea that atmosphere extends beyond the stadium and significantly shapes visitors' overall perceptions of the host destination.

4.2.4 Economic Expectations and Tourism Demand

A distinct thematic cluster emerged in the blog analysis regarding economic impact and tourism demand. Blogs discussed increased accommodation prices, spikes in Airbnb searches near

stadiums, predictions of millions of inbound tourists, and opportunities for local businesses. Several posts referenced the rapid growth of global sports tourism and the economic magnitude associated with hosting a 48-team World Cup.

Summary of Findings

Across both data sets, perceptions of the United States as a World Cup host revealed a mix of strong organizational confidence and significant concerns. Participants consistently described the U.S. as efficient, technologically advanced, and capable of providing large-scale, high-production events. These attributes contribute to generally positive expectations of strategic provisioning for 2026.

At the same time, safety and crowd management emerged as a central common concern. Fears related to gun violence, policing, and uncertainty about managing highly passionate fan groups from all over the world. References to organizational problems during Copa América 2024 further reinforced that strong infrastructure alone does not guarantee effective event control. This creates a dual perception of the U.S. as both highly competent and potentially risky.

Cultural differences also shaped expectations, with both datasets characterizing U.S. sports culture as entertainment-focused and oriented toward commercial gain, in contrast to the emotional and traditional football cultures of Europe and South America. Therefore, participants expect the authentic atmosphere of the upcoming World Cup to come primarily from international fans.

Overall experience expectations were centered on large-scale entertainment, city activation, and an “Americanized” mega-event style. Media narratives, particularly regarding politics, immigration, and safety, significantly influenced perceptions, sometimes creating ambiguity about what attending the tournament will truly be like.

Finally, the blog's findings added an economic perspective, noting an expected increase in accommodation demand, mobility pressures, and tourism revenue.

Together, these insights present a destination image of the United States as highly capable yet culturally distinct and safety-ambiguous, forming the basis for further interpretation in the Discussion chapter.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the previous section in relation to the research questions and the existing literature on mega football events, destination image, and sports tourism. Drawing on insights from qualitative interviews with international football fans and thematic analysis of online blogs, this discussion examines how perceptions of the United States as a host destination for the 2026 FIFA World Cup are constructed and mediated. Particular attention is given to how infrastructural capacity, perceptions of safety, cultural expectations, media narratives, and tourism-related considerations interact to shape a complex and sometimes ambivalent destination image. Thereby, the discussion focuses on both points of difference and similarity between personal fans' perspectives and the broader digital tourism conversation, providing a deeper understanding of how mega football events are perceived beyond the sporting context.

5.1 International Fans' Perceptions and Destination Image Formation in the United States

The interview findings provide important insights into how mega football events shape international visitors' perceptions and contribute to the United States' destination image. In line with destination image theory, these perspectives reflect an interaction between cognitive evaluations (infrastructure, safety, organization), affective responses (excitement, atmosphere, emotions), and behavioral intentions related to attendance and travel (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

A dominant interpretation appearing from the interviews is the strong association between the U.S. and organizational competence. Participants repeatedly perceived the country as technologically advanced and capable of delivering large-scale events. One interviewee described the U.S. as “very professional when it comes to organizing big events; everything usually works well”, reinforcing the perception of logistical solidity. This lines up with previous research indicating that mega-events strengthen the cognitive dimension of destination image, specifically through visible infrastructure, global media exposure, and operational proficiency (Emami et al., 2023). Similar to findings from Russia's 2018 World Cup, where modern facilities and organizational efficiency seem to function as symbolic

signals of care and reliability, reinforcing international confidence in the host nation (Rozhda & Sheresheva, 2021).

The interview results also reveal that positive evaluations coexist with negative aspects. Participants frequently referred to various safety-related concerns, supporting existing literature that identifies perceived risk and safety as central components of destination image formation, particularly in the sport tourism context, characterized by high crowd density and emotional intensity. While the United States is widely known for its capabilities, these safety concerns introduce uncertainty into the affective dimension of destination image, creating a feeling of excitement mixed with awareness (Johann et al., 2021; Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022). As one participant noted, “I would love to go, but safety is always something in the back of my mind when I think about the U.S.” These concerns introduce ambiguity into the affective dimension of destination image

As noted earlier, interviewees did not report avoidance intentions despite these concerns. This finding contributes to previous studies suggesting that, in mega football events, emotional attachment and symbolic value can neutralize perceived risk (Cho et al., 2020; Mollah et al., 2021). Attendance is framed as a meaningful, once-in-a-lifetime experience rather than a rational travel decision. Therefore, the conative dimension of destination image remains largely positive, even when cognitive and affective evaluations are complex or contradictory (Getz & Page).

Cultural comparison emerged as another key interpretive theme shaping perspectives. Participants contrasted the U.S. sports culture – described as entertainment-driven and commercial – with the emotional and intense football traditions of South America and Europe. This supports existing arguments that football tourism is deeply immersed in cultural meaning and identity (Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022). Interviewees largely expected the World Cup's authentic atmosphere to be generated by fans from around the world rather than by local supporters, indicating that the host nation provides the stage while visitors create the emotional experience. This finding contributes to debates on mega-events as co-produced experiences, in which destination image is shaped not only by the host but also by international fan communities attending these events (Duignan et al., 2022).

Ultimately, media narratives were regarded as a powerful influence on the formation of perception. Participants' responses explicitly acknowledge that their expectations were shaped by international news coverage of U.S. politics, immigration, and security. Cited literature

emphasizes the role of mediated representations in constructing destination image, particularly prior to travel. (Müller et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2021). In this context, the coexistence of positive infrastructural images with negative media narratives contributes to an ambivalent destination image.

The interview findings demonstrate that mega football events shape perceptions of the United States through a complex interaction of safety, culture, organization, and media influence. These results directly respond to Objective 1 by identifying the main factors shaping international fans' perceptions, and they address RQ1 by demonstrating how mega football events serve as strong mechanisms for destinations' image formation, reinforcing competence and performance while also revealing cultural and safety-related tensions.

5.2 Destination Image Construction and Tourism Narratives in Blog Discourse

The blog analysis provides a complementary perspective to the interview findings by disclosing how the United States is represented within broader tourism-oriented and media-influenced narratives surrounding mega football events. Unlike interviews, which capture personal expectations and experiential interpretations, blogs are mediated texts that shape pre-visit destination image formation among potential international visitors. Consequently, the blog findings primarily contribute to understanding how public discussions and media narratives surrounding mega football events influence perceptions of the United States as a tourism destination, thereby directly addressing RQ2.

Across the collected blog content, the U.S. is consistently portrayed as a destination with extraordinary infrastructure and logistical capacity, capable of accommodating massive tourism flows. Reinforcing prior research, mega-events once again serve as global showcases for international infrastructure, enhancing the cognitive image of the host destination (Emami et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, blog narratives extend beyond infrastructure to highlight tensions related to urban mobility and crowd capacity. Distress regarding accommodation shortages, congestion, and inter-city travel logistics is recurrent, reflecting the tourism-oriented focus of the blog discussion. Bloggers frequently warned that “getting around host cities on matchdays could be one of the biggest challenges for visitors”, indicating awareness of operational pressure points.

These narratives align with studies emphasizing that mega-events generate not only opportunities but also pressures on host destinations, particularly when visitor volumes exceed routine tourism flows (Duignan et al., 2022). From this perspective, blogs contribute to a more refined cognitive image, acknowledging both capability and tension.

Safety and crowd management, emerging as the most important interpretative theme in blog disclosure, was often framed through references to recent events such as the Copa America 2024. Unlike interviews, in which safety concerns are speculative and emotionally mediated, blogs present risk perceptions through concrete incidents, including heat-related emergencies, policing challenges, and overcrowding. One blog noted that “the chaos outside the stadium raised serious questions about how prepared the U.S. really is for football crowds”, illustrating how specific events become focal points for destination risk narratives. This finding reinforces the existing literature emphasizing the role of media amplification in shaping perceptions of destination risk, particularly when adverse incidents receive extensive coverage (Johann et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021). As a result, blogs play a critical role in reinforcing the affective dimension of destination image by associating the United States with uncertainty and potential vulnerability in a football-specific context.

Still, blogs do not frame these safety concerns as a restraint but rather as conditions needing improved governance and culturally sensitive management. Arguments by Tobar and Ramshaw (2022) that football mega-events require host destinations to adapt beyond infrastructural preparation and address culturally fixed fan behaviours are supported by this finding. Consequently, the blog disclosure that the success of the 2026 World Cup and the reputation of the U.S. as a destination image are based not solely on physical capacity but also on the country’s ability to align operational practices with global football norms.

Matchday atmosphere and fan culture also stand out in blog narratives, although they are framed primarily through tourism experiences rather than as emotional attachments. The blog emphasizes fans' zones, bars, public screenings, and street celebrations as essential components of the event experience, thereby reinforcing the notion that mega football events extend far beyond stadium boundaries. This aligns with research that frames mega-events as urban festivals that transform host cities into experimental spaces where sport and tourism intersect (Duignan et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2020). In this sense, blogs contribute to an affective destination image centred on energy, social interaction, and cultural exchange.

Economic impact and tourism demand form a distinct but secondary thematic cluster within the blog analysis. While blogs repeatedly mention increased accommodation prices, spikes in short-term rentals, and rising tourist demand during the tournament. Blog discussions frequently referenced increased accommodation prices, spikes in short-term rental searches near stadiums, and expectations of high visitor volumes during the tournament. However, these economic aspects were framed primarily as practical travel-related considerations rather than as central evaluative criteria. This finding reveals that economic impact is not a principal concern in the blog debate. This contrasts with academic literature, which often emphasizes economic legacy as a central justification for hosting mega-events (Müller et al., 2022), highlighting a gap between academic focus and public tourism narratives.

Overall, the blog findings underline the role of digital media in shaping a mediated destination image of the United States as a mega-event host. This image is characterized by strong confidence in infrastructure, heightened sensitivity to safety and crowd management, and a tourism-driven emphasis on experience and atmosphere. In contrast to interviews, blogs focus on collective narratives and media framing rather than personal anticipation. Together, these insights extend the findings of the qualitative interviews by demonstrating how mega football events influence destination image formation not only through lived experience but also through digital storytelling and public communication.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that hosting a mega football event, such as the FIFA World Cup, entails far more than infrastructural competence or economic ambition. The destination image of the United States as a host is shaped through a complex interaction of organizational capacity, emotional responses, cultural expectations, and mediated narratives. By placing international fan perceptions, cultural expectations, and mediated narratives shaping destination image at the center of the analysis, this research highlights the importance of experience, safety, and authenticity in shaping how mega-events are anticipated and remembered. As the 2026 World Cup approaches, understanding these dimensions will be critical for transforming logistical strength into a positive and lasting destination image.

6.1 Theoretical and practical contributions

This study contributes to the literature on destination image and mega-event tourism in various important ways. First, the findings reinforce the multidimensional nature of destination image formation by practically demonstrating the interaction between cognitive, affective, and conative components in the context of mega football events. While much of the existing literature focuses on infrastructure and economic legacy as primary justifications for hosting mega-events, this research shows that emotional responses and perceived cultural fit are equally influential in shaping international fans' expectations.

Second, the findings expand destination image theory by demonstrating the importance of cultural comparison in mega-event contexts. Instead of evaluating the host destination in isolation, participants actively compared the U.S. with football cultures in South America and Europe. This comparative framing suggests that destination image formation for mega-events is intrinsically relational and historically situated.

Third, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on media and mediated representations by demonstrating how digital narratives and travel blogs reinterpret, amplify, and even challenge official destination branding. The contradiction between infrastructural preparation and security-related preoccupations illustrates how media discourse can generate unresolved destination images even in highly developed host countries.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer several implications for all parties involved in organizing mega football events. While infrastructure investment remains essential, the results indicate that perceived safety and effective crowd management are critical to the formation of destination image among international fans. Addressing security concerns transparently and proactively may be as important as displaying stadiums and technological capabilities. Also, the importance of cultural expectations suggests that event organizers must acknowledge and accommodate diverse football fan cultures. Creating shared spaces that allow expressive fan behavior (fan zones, public screenings) may enhance the authenticity of the event experience.

Lastly, the strong influence of travel blogs and online narratives underlines the importance of digital storytelling and experiential communication. Collaborations with independent content creators that directly address concerns emerging from previous events can help reduce uncertainty and build trust among potential travelers. However, it is equally important to

recognize that narratives focused solely on economic legacy may be less effective for international audiences than those emphasizing experience quality, atmosphere, and emotional connection.

6.2 Limitations and future studies

As with all research, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged, namely, its qualitative design and purposive sampling, which constrain the validity of the findings. While the study provides rich, in-depth insights into international fan perceptions, it does not aim to represent all potential World Cup Visitors.

The blog analysis relied on publicly available English-language content, which may underrepresent perspectives from non-English-speaking regions. Moreover, perceptions were examined prior to the 2026 World Cup, meaning that expectations rather than lived event experiences were analyzed. Actual visitor experiences during the tournament may differ from pre-event perceptions.

These limitations do not compromise the validity of the findings; instead, they reflect the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study.

The findings of this dissertation open several avenues for future research that could employ a repeated-measures design, comparing pre-event expectations with post-event experiences to examine how destination image evolves after the tournament. Quantitative approaches could also be used to assess the relative importance of safety, atmosphere, and infrastructure across larger, more diverse samples.

Additionally, comparative research on the arrangements across different host countries could further illustrate how cultural context influences mega-event destination image formation. Finally, future research could explore the perspectives of residents and volunteers to complement visitor-focused examination.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Interview Transcripts

A1. Transcription Interview 1

Interviewer: Hi, thank you for taking the time to participate. Just to let you know, this interview is being recorded for academic purposes only, and your identity will remain anonymous. Do you agree to participate under these conditions?

Participant: Yes, that's fine. I agree.

Interviewer: To start, how would you describe your general interest in football?

Participant: I would say I have a strong interest in football, although maybe a bit less than in previous years. I still follow it quite closely, even if I also enjoy other sports. I live in Portugal, where football is extremely important, like in many parts of Europe, so it is very present in daily life. Football is clearly the number one sport here and honestly in much of the world.

Interviewer: And when you think about the United States, what do you usually associate it with in terms of sport or tourism?

Participant: The United States is a very large country with many different sports. From a tourism perspective, it is one of those destinations that almost everyone dreams of visiting at least once. Cities like New York, Los Angeles, or Hollywood come immediately to mind. There is no doubt that the U.S. is a major destination, both for tourism and for hosting large sports events.

Interviewer: When you think specifically about mega football events, like the 2026 FIFA World Cup or the Copa América 2024, what comes to mind about the U.S. as a host?

Participant: At first, it feels a bit strange, because football is not traditionally the number one sport in the U.S. Americans usually prefer sports like baseball, American football, basketball, or ice hockey. That said, football has grown a lot in recent years. For example, my cousin lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and he told me there are many football schools linked to European clubs like Benfica, Barcelona, or Real Madrid. They promote football there, maybe to develop talent, but also because the U.S. is a very rich country and football often follows money. I see hosting the World Cup as a win–win situation for both the U.S. and FIFA. Even though Canada

and Mexico are also hosts, the main focus is clearly on the United States. It reminds me a bit of Qatar. Hosting brings financial and political advantages.

Interviewer: Before these events were announced, how would you describe the U.S. as a tourism destination?

Participant: Honestly, the U.S. does not need the World Cup to be attractive as a tourism destination. People already dream of going there. There are so many cities and places to visit. It is not just one country, it feels more like a continent. I have never been, but one of my dreams is to visit several cities, not just New York. The U.S. would be a major tourism destination even without the World Cup.

Interviewer: Do you think these events might change your perception of the country in any way?

Participant: My overall perception of the U.S. is positive, but in recent years it has changed somewhat, especially during the Trump administration. There has been a lot of focus on immigration, which can create negative perceptions for some people. At the same time, the U.S. values tourism because tourism brings money, so I believe they will be welcoming to visitors. Still, some people associate the U.S. with safety issues, especially gun violence, and that could influence how the country is perceived during these events.

Interviewer: Which aspects of the U.S. as a host do you think would most influence your experience, for example infrastructure, safety, culture, or organization?

Participant: I think they probably have the best infrastructure. Organization will also be very strong. Safety is the aspect that would influence me the most. I expect there will be a lot of police presence and strong security measures. Culturally, the U.S. is very multicultural, especially during a World Cup. I am really curious to see how safe it will feel to attend matches.

Interviewer: How do you imagine attending a mega football event in the U.S. would differ from attending one in Europe or South America?

Participant: In Europe and South America, football is the number one sport, and people are extremely passionate about it. In the U.S., with such a large population, I think there will be many people interested, but also a huge number of international fans. In some stadiums, there might even be more foreigners than Americans. At the same time, Americans are becoming more interested in football, so it could be surprising in a positive way.

Interviewer: What positive or negative feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

Participant: Overall, the feeling is very positive. The U.S. is modern, well-organized, culturally diverse, and has excellent infrastructure. The only negative feelings relate more to political issues and immigration policies. Some people worry that foreigners could be treated with suspicion, especially at borders or security checks.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how might hosting these events affect the United States' global image as a tourism destination?

Participant: I think the impact will be positive. It will show that the U.S. is open to the football world. The country already has a strong tourism image, so the World Cup might not change it dramatically, but it will reinforce it. Unlike Qatar, where perceptions were more controversial, the U.S. already has a stable and positive tourism reputation.

Interviewer: Do you think online content, like blogs or media coverage, influences how people perceive the U.S. as a destination?

Participant: Yes, definitely. Online content always influences people. Social media, videos, and images will be everywhere. Even people who do not attend the event might regret it when they see the content. The U.S. will always be a major tourism destination, but online narratives will still shape perceptions.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Participant: I think the U.S. will try to use these events to grow football even more and attract talent from around the world. They want global attention, even if football is not yet the main sport there. We have seen this before in countries like Japan, where football grew a lot over time.

Participant profile:

Age: 56

Gender: Male

Country of residence: Portugal

Previous football tourism experience: Attended the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany (Angola vs. Portugal), describing the atmosphere, fan celebrations, and city-wide engagement as “amazing.”

A2. Transcription Interview 2

Interviewer: Hi, thank you for your time. I will now record this interview for academic purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous. Do you agree to participate and to have your answers anonymized?

Participant: Yes, I agree.

Interviewer: To start, how would you describe your general interest in football?

Participant: My interest is quite high. I’ve always been a football fan. In the last two years it has decreased a bit, probably because my team is not doing well and my national team is also struggling. But football has always been part of my life. I grew up with it, mainly because of my parents.

Interviewer: What do you usually associate with the United States when you think about sport or tourism?

Participant: When I hear “United States,” I mostly associate it with American football, which I’m also a big fan of. In terms of tourism, I think of mountains, snow, and very modern cities.

Interviewer: When you think about mega football events like the FIFA World Cup 2026 or Copa América 2024, what comes to mind first about the United States as a host?

Participant: I think of a country that is making a strong effort to bring football into its culture. I watched the Copa América on TV and I thought the organization was excellent, but it was lacking that spark you usually see in countries where football is deeply rooted as the main sport.

Interviewer: Before these events were announced, how would you have described the United States as a tourism destination?

Participant: I’ve always seen the U.S. as a very interesting tourism destination, especially because it’s close to my country. I find it safe, I like American culture, and I really like the combination of nature and tourism. You have spectacular natural landscapes and also impressive modern cities.

Interviewer: Do you have any expectations about how these events might change your perception of the country?

Participant: Honestly, I don't really have expectations. I don't think the U.S. will ever become a strong football nation or integrate football deeply into its culture. American sports have huge stadiums with seventy or eighty thousand people, but soccer stadiums usually remain at twenty or thirty thousand. I don't think soccer will ever reach the level of baseball, basketball, or American football there.

Interviewer: Which aspects of the U.S. as a host, such as infrastructure, safety, culture, or organization, do you think would most influence your experience?

Participant: I think infrastructure and organization would influence my experience the most. The U.S. is usually very efficient in logistics and event management, so I would expect things to run smoothly. Culturally it would feel different from football countries, but the comfort and organization would probably stand out.

Interviewer: How do you imagine attending a mega football event in the U.S. would differ from attending one in other regions?

Participant: I've only attended events in the U.S., never in Europe or South America. But based on what I know, I imagine the U.S. would have much better organization compared to South America and even Europe. That's what I would expect, higher levels of organization overall.

Interviewer: What positive or negative feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

Participant: I don't really have strong positive or negative feelings. I just think the passion for football in the U.S. will never reach the level of football countries like Brazil or Spain. Emotionally it won't be the same, but I don't have a strong opinion either way.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how might hosting these events affect the United States' image as a tourism destination globally?

Participant: I don't think it harms the image. On the contrary, I think it helps. It promotes the country, attracts people from abroad, and highlights all the other attractions the U.S. has. So overall, I think it helps promote the country even more.

Interviewer: What characteristics or values do you think the United States projects through these events?

Participant: Innovation is always present. Every time I've been there, they integrate new technological elements. Safety is also a priority. Everything is monitored and you generally feel very safe. Culturally, the U.S. is a young country without very ancient traditions, but innovation and security compensate for that.

Interviewer: Do you think online content influences how people perceive the U.S. as a destination? How?

Participant: Yes, definitely. In a globalized world, it's impossible for online content not to influence you. Blogs, social media, advertising, all of that affects how you perceive a destination.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add about how you perceive the United States as a destination for football tourism?

Participant: I'm not particularly excited about a football event being held in the U.S., but I do like attending events there. Parking is easy, everything flows smoothly, and entering and exiting venues is very efficient. So it's fine that they host these events, but they will never reach the passion found in real football countries.

Participant profile:

Age: 54

Gender: Male

Country of residence: Mexico

Previous attendance at major football events: Yes

A3. Transcription Interview 3

Interviewer: Hi, thank you for taking the time to participate. Before we start, I want to let you know that this interview is being recorded for academic purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous. Do you agree to participate and to have your answers anonymized?

Participant: Yes, I agree.

Interviewer: Great, thank you. To begin, how would you describe your general interest in football?

Participant: I would say I have a fairly high level of interest in football. I grew up in the United States, and when I was younger, I wasn't particularly interested in the sport. However, after moving to Europe over the past couple of years, my interest has grown a lot. I've become a much bigger fan than I ever was growing up.

Interviewer: And when you think about the United States in relation to sport or tourism, what comes to mind?

Participant: In terms of sports, I mostly associate the U.S. with entertainment. American sporting events tend to combine the game itself with a strong entertainment component. For example, things like the Super Bowl halftime show, commercials, and the overall production style really stand out. For tourism, I think about the variety the country offers. There are major cities, national parks, beaches, and many different types of travel experiences.

Interviewer: When you think about mega football events like the 2026 FIFA World Cup or the Copa América 2024, what comes to mind regarding the United States as a host?

Participant: Thinking specifically about the 2026 World Cup, it feels like a very interesting moment for the U.S. to host such a major tournament. Football isn't the biggest sport in the country, so hosting an event of this scale is a big opportunity. As an American, I feel excited about it because I think it could help attract more fans to the sport. At the same time, the political situation in the U.S. is very polarized, which makes hosting such an international event particularly interesting and potentially challenging.

Interviewer: Before these events were announced, how would you have described the United States as a tourism destination?

Participant: I would have described it as a very popular tourism destination with a wide variety of places to visit, including big cities, beaches, and national parks. That said, I think the current political climate has changed how some people view the U.S. as a tourism destination. I believe that many people are now less willing to contribute to the U.S. economy because of the political situation.

Interviewer: What expectations do you have regarding how these events might change your perception of the country?

Participant: I would like to believe that hosting these events will make me feel proud of the country, but I'm not entirely confident. U.S. infrastructure is designed mainly for American football rather than soccer. When soccer matches take place in NFL stadiums, there are often issues related to pitch quality, regulations, ticketing, and crowd management. We're also already seeing rising ticket prices. So overall, I think it will be interesting to see whether these events change my perception in a positive or negative way.

Interviewer: Which aspects of the United States as a host do you think would most influence your experience, such as infrastructure, safety, culture, or organization?

Participant: Culture would probably have the biggest influence. Having lived in Europe, I've seen firsthand how deeply football matters in other regions. In the U.S., football culture isn't as strong or as passionate. Regarding safety, organization, and infrastructure, the U.S. has struggled in past events like the Copa América. They're not as accustomed to the scale of football fandom seen in other countries, so it will be interesting to see how they manage an event of this size.

Interviewer: How do you imagine attending a mega football event in the U.S. would differ from attending one in other regions?

Participant: I think the difference would be quite significant. In Europe or South America, football means much more to people. The culture, the supporters, the ultras, it's all deeply embedded in everyday life. In the U.S., the fandom is not as strong. I haven't attended many matches there, but even from what I've seen, the level of passion is clearly different.

Interviewer: What positive or negative feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

Participant: On the positive side, I'm excited because it could help grow the sport in the U.S. It might attract new fans, highlight the international nature of football, and bring people together. On the negative side, political polarization in the U.S. is very intense right now. Hosting such a large international event in this climate could create additional challenges.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how might hosting these events affect the United States' image as a tourism destination globally?

Participant: If the U.S. manages to host the tournament well, with good conditions, safe environments, and properly managed stadiums, it could improve its global image. However, I

don't think it will significantly change how people view the political situation in the country, which I see as the biggest issue affecting its image right now.

Interviewer: What characteristics or values do you think the U.S. projects through these events?

Participant: Mainly entertainment and business. I expect a strong focus on marketing, sponsorships, commercial partnerships, and a very "big money" style of event production.

Interviewer: Do you think online content influences how people perceive the U.S. as a destination? If so, how?

Participant: Definitely. Online content shapes people's perceptions because it's what they consume on a daily basis. Both positive and negative content exist, and people's views will depend on what they're exposed to. Blogs, media articles, and fan content will play a major role in shaping how the U.S. is perceived globally as a destination.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add about how you perceive the United States as a destination for football tourism?

Participant: Nothing specific, but I do think my perspective is somewhat unique because I've lived in football-focused countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Seeing how important the sport is in those places makes me curious to see how football develops in the U.S. after the tournament. I hope the country hosts the matches well so people gain confidence in the U.S. as a future host of global events.

Participant profile:

Age: 23

Gender: Male

Current place of residence: United States (currently living in Italy on exchange)

Previous attendance at football events: Yes, has traveled for multiple football events and attended several major matches.

A4. Transcription Interview 4

Interviewer: Hi, thank you for your time. I will now record this interview for academic purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous. Do you agree to participate and to have your answers anonymized?

Participant: Yes, I agree.

Interviewer: Great, thank you. To start, how would you describe your general interest in football?

Participant: My interest in football is very strong. I would say it is quite high. I have played football since I was very young and it has always been one of my biggest hobbies. So it is not only a strong interest, I also have a lot of knowledge about the sport.

Interviewer: And when you think about the United States, either in terms of sport or tourism, what usually comes to your mind?

Participant: I immediately think of the big American leagues, mainly the NFL and Major League Baseball. The NBA also comes to mind, but not as strongly. For me, U.S. sports are very connected to show and entertainment. Baseball and American football have many pauses and breaks, and that allows for more spectacle, like halftime shows, stadium food, merchandising, caps, jerseys, all of that.

Interviewer: When you think specifically about mega football events like the FIFA World Cup 2026 or Copa América 2024, what comes to mind first about the United States as a host?

Participant: I mostly think about their ability to create a massive show. Not because of strong football culture, but because they are very good at delivering large-scale media events. We have already seen this with Formula One. It is not traditionally popular in the U.S., but they still manage to host very big and spectacular events because of the money and infrastructure involved. The real question for me is whether they can connect that show with the sporting side and actually generate emotion and fan passion.

Interviewer: Before these events were announced, how would you have described the United States as a tourism destination?

Participant: As a global powerhouse with basically everything you can imagine. If you want desert, they have it. If you want casinos, they have the biggest ones. If you want tropical

beaches, they have them. Mountains too. The U.S. really maximizes everything. And they also have huge social and cultural diversity because of immigration.

Interviewer: And do you think these events could change your perception of the country in any way?

Participant: Yes, but mostly in a negative risk sense. If the events go wrong, my perception could worsen a lot. If they go well, I do not think my perception will improve much, because my expectations of the U.S. are already very high. So I think the U.S. actually has more to lose than to gain.

Interviewer: Which aspects of the U.S. as a host do you think would most influence your experience if you attended?

Participant: Organization and infrastructure, definitely. The U.S. is very strong in hosting huge crowds in the same area because of how developed their cities are. However, distances are a problem. In a World Cup, people like to see several matches within a short travel time. In the U.S., moving between venues could require six or seven hours of flying, which reduces part of the World Cup experience. Still, in terms of show, logistics, and spectacle, the U.S. is very strong.

Interviewer: How do you imagine attending a mega football event in the U.S. would differ from attending one in Europe or South America?

Participant: Compared to countries with strong football culture, like Europe or South America, the emotional atmosphere in the U.S. will probably be colder. In countries like Brazil, Colombia, or Argentina, you feel football everywhere, even if the league quality is not always the highest. In the U.S., the infrastructure is better, but the football culture and stadium emotion are weaker. Personally, I would prefer a country with deep football culture rather than one focused mainly on show and spectacle.

Interviewer: What positive or negative feelings do you associate with the idea of the U.S. hosting a football mega-event?

Participant: On the negative side, because they do not have strong football culture, part of the atmosphere might be lost in the stadiums. They may try to compensate with show elements, like having a big artist perform at halftime, which is not typical in football. On the positive

side, if they manage to combine the best of both worlds, the show and the sport, it could become something very unique and special.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how could hosting these events affect the U.S. image as a tourism destination globally?

Participant: I think it could improve the image. People who do not know the country might be surprised by its diversity. Miami is completely different from Texas, for example. You can ski and surf in the same country. That diversity could attract more tourists in the future. The main challenge will be prices, because tickets and travel costs are already very high.

Interviewer: What values or characteristics do you think the United States projects through these events?

Participant: Security, technology, and taking everything to the next level. The U.S. always wants to show that it is number one in spectacle, with fireworks, food, shows, and production. I think this World Cup will be no exception.

Interviewer: Do you think online content like blogs, media coverage, or fan videos influences how people perceive the U.S. as a destination?

Participant: Absolutely. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and streamers show every corner of a World Cup in short viral content. Influencers with millions of followers can massively shift perceptions. Even smaller creators can expose weaknesses or highlight strengths. Online content will play a huge role in how the U.S. is perceived.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add about the U.S. as a destination for football tourism?

Participant: The U.S. does not have the strongest football culture, but if they manage to align their showmanship with football tradition, the World Cup could become something very special.

Participant profile:

Age: 22

Gender: Male

Country of residence: Spain

Previous football travel experience: Yes. The participant has traveled to France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and other countries to attend football matches.