

## **Mega-Events and Geopolitical Communication: Arab and Global North Strategies of Visibility and Soft Power.**

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### ABSTRACT

Mega-events have evolved from cultural and sporting gatherings into sophisticated instruments of geopolitical communication and soft power. In an era of mediated global politics, states use these high-profile spectacles to shape international perception, construct legitimacy, and project national influence. This study aims to compare how Arab and Global North nations deploy mega-events as strategic platforms for visibility and narrative control within global hierarchies of power. Using a comparative case study method, it examines Arab cases—Qatar’s 2022 FIFA World Cup, Expo 2020 Dubai, and Saudi Arabia’s Expo 2030 bid—alongside Western counterparts such as the London 2012 Olympics, the Venice Biennale, and Paris 2024 Olympics. The analysis draws on framing theory, soft power theory, and critical geopolitics to interpret how event communication and media representation operate as geopolitical performance. Findings reveal that Arab states employ mega-events to counter stereotypes, enhance legitimacy, and reposition themselves as global mediators, while Western nations use them to reassert cultural authority and sustain leadership narratives in a changing world order. The paper concludes that mega-events are not neutral cultural displays but symbolic battlegrounds for visibility, legitimacy, and influence in a media system structured by enduring global asymmetries. These insights advance Arab media and global communication scholarship by situating mega-events as dynamic arenas of soft power negotiation.

**Keywords:** *Mega-events; Soft power; Geopolitical communication; Arab media; Global North; Visibility politics.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a hyper-connected and mediatized global environment, mega-events have become central arenas through which states project identity, negotiate visibility, and exercise soft power. Contemporary spectacles—including the Olympic Games, World Expos, global cultural festivals, and international sporting competitions—now function as strategic communication infrastructures that shape international perception and geopolitical standing (Boyle, 2021; Kennett & de Moragas, 2022). As media, diplomacy, and digital platforms converge, mega-events

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*Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.*

increasingly serve as orchestrated performances of national narratives and global influence (Grix & Brannagan, 2023). This study situates these events within the broader field of geopolitical communication, examining how both Arab states and Global North nations leverage mega-events to communicate power in an unequal media landscape.

### *1.1 Research Background and Context*

Mega-events have expanded from symbolic celebrations to sophisticated instruments of international communication and nation positioning. They offer states a global stage on which to perform identity, legitimacy, and modernity (Kobierecki, 2021; Ren & Li, 2023). As digital communication accelerates, these events have become vehicles through which governments curate narratives for global and domestic audiences, transforming public diplomacy into a highly visual and platform-mediated enterprise (Kim & Popp, 2020; Udris & Imhof, 2023).

In the Arab region—particularly within Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—mega-events are now integral to branding, modernization, and geopolitical strategies. Qatar’s 2022 FIFA World Cup, Expo 2020 Dubai, and Saudi Arabia’s Expo 2030 bid exemplify efforts to counter long-standing stereotypes, project innovation, and reposition Arab states within global media hierarchies (Alghamdi, 2023; Kraidy, 2020; Mellor, 2023). These initiatives seek to recast the Arab world not as a peripheral geopolitical zone but as a center of technological ambition, cultural diversity, and global connectivity.

In contrast, Global North mega-events—such as London 2012, the Venice Biennale, and Paris 2024—continue to reinforce symbolic authority and cultural leadership. These events often reproduce narratives of heritage, sustainability, and liberal values, sustaining long-standing forms of Western legitimacy within global discourse (Boyle, 2021; Giulianotti & Horne, 2022; Møller & Petersen, 2023). Despite this growing global reliance on mega-events as communicative tools, scholarly work comparing Arab and Western cases remains limited. Existing studies often focus on isolated regional cases, economic outcomes, or media controversies without examining how mega-events operate as geopolitical communication platforms within structural inequalities of global media (Chalaby, 2021; Thussu, 2023). This study addresses this gap.

### *1.2 Statement of the Problem*

Despite growing scholarship on soft power and nation branding, most studies remain regionally focused or descriptively oriented, emphasizing economic or image-building outcomes while overlooking the communicative and geopolitical dimensions of mega-events (Kaneva, 2018; Kennett & Poulton, 2012). Few comparative analyses explore how Arab and Global North states employ event-based communication differently to negotiate legitimacy and visibility within an asymmetric global media system (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022). Research on mega-events has expanded significantly, yet three gaps remain:

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

- *Limited cross-regional comparative scholarship*: Few studies systematically compare how Arab and Global North states use mega-events to pursue legitimacy and symbolic power in asymmetric communication environments (Thussu, 2023; Isakjee & Richardson, 2022).
- *Fragmented theoretical integration*: Existing works often apply framing, soft power, or geopolitical theories separately. There is limited integration of these perspectives with emerging approaches such as platform geopolitics and algorithmic visibility (Kumar & Donovan, 2023; Ye & Xiong, 2022).
- *Insufficient attention to digital mediation*: Research has not fully captured how digital infrastructures and platforms shape the communication of mega-events, nor how platform asymmetries influence whose narratives gain traction (Poell et al., 2022; Venturini et al., 2023).

Thus, there is a need for a comparative, theoretically integrated study that explains how mega-events operate as sites where visibility, legitimacy, and influence are negotiated within global power hierarchies. Moreover, while theories such as Framing Theory, Soft Power, and Critical Geopolitics have been applied separately, they have seldom been integrated to explain how mega-events operate as performative arenas of geopolitical storytelling. This study fills that gap by developing an integrated conceptual framework (Figure 1) that links message framing, attraction and legitimacy, spatial hierarchy, and digital mediation to global communication outcomes.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze how mega-events function as instruments of geopolitical communication and soft power across Arab and Global North contexts. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine how different states frame mega-events to construct legitimacy and visibility.
2. Compare the communicative strategies of Arab and Western states in deploying mega-events for soft power projection.
3. Explore how digital platforms and media infrastructures mediate geopolitical visibility and influence during mega-events.

These objectives guide the study's comparative and theoretical approach, bridging insights from communication, cultural diplomacy, and political geography.

### 1.4 Rationale and Expected Contribution

The rationale for this research lies in the need to reconceptualize mega-events as communicative processes rather than isolated spectacles. In an era of digital globalization, the ability to control narratives, images, and visibility has become a central dimension of power (Chalaby, 2021; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022). Understanding mega-events as communicative processes is increasingly crucial as narratives, images, and algorithmic visibility become key

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

instruments of geopolitical power (Poell & Nieborg, 2023; Thusu, 2023). This study makes four contributions:

- *Develops a comparative geopolitical communication framework* integrating framing, soft power, spatial politics, and digital platform theory.
- *Advances Arab media scholarship* by examining how Gulf states use mega-events to renegotiate global visibility and challenge representational marginalization.
- *Clarifies how Global North mega-events maintain symbolic dominance* through continuity frames, cultural authority, and infrastructural centrality.
- *Demonstrates how algorithmic mediation conditions soft power*, showing that visibility is increasingly co-produced by platforms, states, and global publics.

By positioning mega-events as arenas of symbolic competition shaped by digital infrastructures, this study provides new insights for scholars and policymakers working at the intersection of soft power, platform governance, and global image politics. By framing mega-events as sites of negotiation over visibility, legitimacy, and influence, this study deepens our understanding of how power operates through global communication infrastructures. It also informs policymakers, media practitioners, and scholars interested in the intersection of soft power, global image politics, and mediated diplomacy. The following section reviews existing research on mega-events, nation branding, and soft power, identifying the theoretical foundations that underpin the study's conceptual and analytical framework.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1 Mega-Events as Media Spectacles*

Mega-events have long been recognized as influential communicative phenomena, but recent scholarship highlights their evolving role in digitally networked societies. Foundational work by Roche (2000) and Dayan and Katz (1992) conceptualized mega-events as global rituals that reinforce national identity and collective belonging. Later, Kellner (2003) expanded this to the notion of media spectacle. Contemporary research builds on these insights, arguing that mega-events now operate within a hybrid media environment shaped by digital platforms, algorithmic distribution, and social media logics (Boyle, 2021; Naraine & Parent, 2022).

Mega-events serve as performative stages where states display nationhood, assert leadership, and articulate ideological narratives (Giulianotti & Horne, 2022; Chiu & Lee, 2023). They function not only as cultural celebrations but as strategic communication tools for managing international perception, attracting investment, and projecting geopolitical influence (Kobierecki, 2021; Ren & Li, 2023). However, the symbolic rewards of these events remain unevenly distributed. Media visibility, legitimacy, and credibility are still largely concentrated in the Global North due to historical privilege and platform-centric asymmetries (Thusu, 2023; Poell & Nieborg, 2023).

## 2.2 Soft Power and Nation Branding

Soft power, popularized by Nye (2004), provides a key lens for understanding the communicative function of mega-events. Soft power emphasizes attraction through culture, values, and diplomacy. Recent scholarship extends this concept to sport diplomacy, cultural mega-events, and nation branding, framing them as symbolic tools for legitimacy and influence (Grix & Brannagan, 2023; Kim & Popp, 2020).

Mega-events are central to what Anholt (2010) terms *competitive identity*, whereby states strategically manage reputation through global performances. For emerging states, such events serve as avenues to transform infrastructural development into symbolic capital and international credibility (Kobierecki, 2021; Cornelissen & Tichaawa, 2020). For established powers, mega-events function to reinforce pre-existing reputations of leadership, creativity, and openness (Giulianotti & Horne, 2022). This dual dynamic—legitimacy-seeking for emerging states versus dominance-maintaining for established states—is crucial to understanding contemporary soft power politics and forms a core comparative theme in this study.

## 2.3 Arab Media, Visibility, and Geopolitical Performance

In the Arab region, mega-events have become central to state-led strategies for modernization, global positioning, and representational transformation. Recent studies highlight how Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states deploy large-scale events to project cosmopolitanism, innovation, and openness in an effort to counter long-standing stereotypes (Alghamdi, 2023; Kraidy, 2020). Mega-events such as Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup and Expo 2020 Dubai serve as platforms for reshaping global narratives about the Arab world and asserting new forms of Arab agency. Gulf states have also invested heavily in media infrastructures, digital storytelling, and cultural production to amplify their soft power (El-Issawi, 2022; Mellor, 2023). These efforts reflect a shift from defensive communication to proactive visibility politics, where Arab states actively seek to influence global discourse rather than merely respond to Western framing (Dajani, 2020).

However, Arab visibility is constrained by the global communication environment, which remains dominated by Western platforms, algorithms, and media networks (Poell et al., 2022; Thussu, 2023). Platform governance research highlights that digital infrastructures—often controlled by Western technology companies—mediate and sometimes limit the visibility of Global South narratives (Kumar & Donovan, 2023; Venturini et al., 2023). This structural asymmetry informs the geopolitics of Arab mega-events and underscores the challenges of achieving representational sovereignty in a platformized world.

## 2.4 Mega-Events in the Global North

Mega-events hosted in the Global North typically emphasize continuity, heritage, and cultural authority. Events such as London 2012, the Venice Biennale, and Paris 2024 illustrate how Western states use mega-events to reaffirm leadership in culture, liberal values,

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

sustainability, and artistic innovation (Møller & Petersen, 2023; Giulianotti & Horne, 2022). London 2012, for example, strategically celebrated multiculturalism and civic inclusivity, projecting Britain as a confident and progressive global actor. Similarly, the Venice Biennale continues to function as a cultural institution that shapes global artistic discourse and asserts European centrality (Schröder & Eisenhauer, 2021).

Paris 2024 illustrates the shift toward moral and ecological universalism, integrating sustainability and social solidarity into its branding (French Ministry of Sport, 2023; Scheu et al., 2022). These events highlight how Western states rely on mega-events to reinforce existing soft power rather than construct new legitimacy. Thus, while Arab mega-events seek to challenge stereotypes and reposition regional identity, Western mega-events primarily serve to maintain cultural dominance and normative influence.

### 2.5 Comparative Gaps in Scholarship

Despite extensive literature on media spectacles and soft power, comparative studies bridging the Arab and Western contexts remain scarce. Existing analyses often isolate case studies or focus narrowly on event management and tourism outcomes. Few integrate theories of communication, geopolitics, and media power across regions. Furthermore, much scholarship on Arab media still treats the region as a *receiver* of global narratives rather than an *active producer* of global discourse (Sakr 2020; Mellor 2023). Despite extensive research on mega-events, several gaps persist:

- *Limited cross-regional comparison:* Scholarly work frequently isolates Arab and Western cases, failing to examine how mega-events function within global hierarchies of visibility and power (Thussu, 2023; Isakjee & Richardson, 2022).
- *Lack of integrated theoretical approaches:* While studies draw on soft power, critical geopolitics, or framing theory, few synthesize these frameworks with emerging perspectives such as platform geopolitics or algorithmic governance (Poell & Nieborg, 2023; Ye & Xiong, 2022).
- *Insufficient analysis of digital infrastructures:* Existing literature often underestimates the role of platforms, data extraction, and algorithmic visibility in shaping how mega-event narratives circulate globally (Venturini et al., 2023).

This article addresses these gaps by offering the first systematic comparative analysis of Arab and Western mega-events through the lens of geopolitical communication. It makes three key contributions:

- Conceptualizes mega-events as communicative performances embedded within global hierarchies of visibility.
- Develops a cross-regional analytical framework linking soft power, framing, critical geopolitics, and platform governance.

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

- Positions Arab media diplomacy within contemporary debates on digital power and symbolic inequality.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on insights from the preceding literature, this study integrates four complementary theoretical traditions—Framing Theory, Soft Power, Critical Geopolitics, and Platform Geopolitics—to construct a holistic model of how mega-events communicate power, legitimacy, and visibility in a digitally mediated global order. Together, these frameworks illuminate how meaning is produced, how influence is negotiated, and how global hierarchies are reinforced or contested through the spectacle of mega-events. This section outlines each perspective and demonstrates how they collectively inform the comparative analysis of Arab and Global North mega-events.

### *3.1 Framing Theory and Communicative Construction*

Framing theory provides a foundation for analysing how actors shape meaning through selection, emphasis and narrative organization. Entman (1993, 52) defines framing as the process of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient” to promote a particular interpretation or solution. Contemporary scholarship extends this work by emphasizing how frames circulate across hybrid media environments and shape global perceptions of states, cultures, and events (Lück et al., 2022; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2023). In mega-events, framing operates at three levels:

- *State-driven frames* (e.g., innovation, unity, modernity).
- *Media-driven frames*, which may challenge or recontextualize official narratives.
- *Public and digital frames*, amplified through platform logics and user-generated content.

Previous research has shown that the framing of mega-events influences how nations are perceived internationally (Boyle and Hughes 1994; Tomlinson 2010). Host countries deploy strategic frames to project themselves as modern, peaceful, and globally integrated, while international media may reframe the same events through sceptical or Orientalist lenses (Hassan 2021; Mansour 2019). In Arab contexts, where visibility is often mediated through external actors, framing becomes a form of symbolic negotiation—a way to contest dominant narratives and articulate alternative visions of Arab modernity (El-Issawi 2021; Mellor 2023).

By applying framing theory, this study identifies recurring narrative structures within the official discourse and media coverage of each mega-event. The analysis distinguishes between legitimacy-seeking frames (used by Arab hosts) and dominance-maintaining frames (used by Western hosts), revealing how the strategic deployment of symbols and values communicates geopolitical intent. For Arab states, framing becomes a means of symbolic negotiation—an intentional effort to challenge entrenched stereotypes and articulate alternative visions of Arab modernity (El-Issawi, 2022; Mellor, 2023). Western states, by contrast, deploy continuity frames

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

that reinforce an image of cultural leadership and global stewardship (Boyle, 2021). This study uses framing theory to differentiate legitimacy-seeking frames (Arab) from dominance-maintaining frames (Western), illuminating how states strategically use symbols, narratives, and visual discourses to communicate geopolitical intent

### 3.2 Soft Power and the Symbolic Economy

Soft Power theory, originally articulated by Nye (2004), explains how states cultivate influence through attraction rather than coercion. Recent scholarship highlights the growing importance of soft power in sport, cultural diplomacy, and digital communication, particularly within mega-events (Grix & Brannagan, 2023; Kim & Popp, 2020). Mega-events function as soft power infrastructures by enabling states to:

- Showcase cultural values and political visions
- Demonstrate modernity, competence, and global integration
- Accumulate symbolic capital and international legitimacy

Anholt's (2010) notion of *competitive identity* emphasizes how nations use visibility to manage global reputations. This dynamic is especially salient in the Arab world, where states deploy mega-events to reposition themselves within global discourse and counter decades of representational marginalization (Kraidy, 2020; Alghamdi, 2023). However, scholars caution that soft power is contingent on credibility, narrative control, and media interpretation. A mega-event can reinforce or undermine reputation depending on how it is framed and received (Cornelissen & Tichaawa, 2020). This tension is central to emerging powers: visibility does not automatically translate into legitimacy.

### 3.3 Critical Geopolitics and the Performance of Power

Critical Geopolitics situates mega-events within broader spatial hierarchies and discursive constructions of global power. Rather than viewing geopolitics as material strategy alone, Ó Tuathail (1996) argues that it is also the "writing of global space"—the narrative and symbolic production of geopolitical identities. Contemporary work extends this view by examining how cultural performances and urban mega-projects communicate geopolitical aspirations (Møller & Petersen, 2023; Ren & Li, 2023). Mega-events serve as geopolitical performances through which states:

- Enact desired identities
- Stage modernity, order, and inclusion
- Reproduce or contest global spatial hierarchies

Arab hosts often combine architectural spectacle with inclusive rhetoric to challenge perceptions of peripherality and assert global relevance (Mellor, 2023; Khatib, 2022). Conversely, Western mega-events frequently reaffirm symbolic centrality through narratives of heritage, sustainability, and universal values (Giulianotti & Horne, 2022). Critical Geopolitics thus helps

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

explain why mega-events remain pivotal in global struggles for legitimacy and representational power.

### *3.4 Platform Geopolitics and Mediated Visibility*

Platform Geopolitics offers a contemporary lens for understanding how digital infrastructures—social media, data systems, algorithms, and platform governance—shape global communication flows. Digital platforms act not just as mediators but as geopolitical actors that influence visibility, legitimacy, and discursive power (Poell & Nieborg, 2023; Kumar & Donovan, 2023). Key insights include:

- Algorithms privilege Western discourse, languages, and news sources.
- Attention economies shape which narratives become globally dominant.
- Platform governance structures enable or constrain geopolitical visibility.

Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe this as *data colonialism*, where digital infrastructures reproduce historical hierarchies of knowledge and representation. For Arab states, this creates a double bind: while platforms enable global outreach, they also filter Arab narratives through Western-controlled systems (Venturini et al., 2023; Thussu, 2023). Mega-events increasingly unfold within these platform ecosystems, where hashtags, influencer networks, live-streaming, and algorithmic curation shape global reception. Qatar 2022 and Paris 2024 exemplify how event narratives are amplified, contested, or suppressed through digital infrastructures.

Thus, platform geopolitics is essential for understanding contemporary soft power dynamics and the mediated struggle for global attention. In the context of mega-events, platforms such as Twitter (X), YouTube, and Instagram serve as primary arenas for soft power competition. They amplify or marginalise narratives, often privileging Western sources due to linguistic, algorithmic, and economic biases (Fuchs 2017). Arab hosts thus operate within a double bind: while digital platforms expand outreach, they also reproduce asymmetrical visibility structures. By integrating platform geopolitics into this study, the analysis captures how digital mediation conditions geopolitical communication. For instance, Qatar 2022 leveraged digital storytelling to counter Western media criticism, while Paris 2024 capitalised on algorithmic promotion of sustainability and inclusion narratives. Examining these dynamics reveals how global platforms mediate the struggle for symbolic equality.

### *3.5 Integrative Analytical Model*

Bringing these frameworks together, the study adopts an integrative model of geopolitical communication (see Figure 1). Framing theory identifies the narrative structures through which meaning is produced; soft power theory explains the motivational logic of attraction; critical geopolitics situates these processes within spatial hierarchies; and platform geopolitics contextualises them within digital infrastructures. Combining these perspectives, the study adopts an integrated model of geopolitical communication that conceptualizes mega-events as: performative (Critical Geopolitics), persuasive (Soft Power), narratively constructed (Framing

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

Theory) and algorithmically mediated (Platform Geopolitics). It recognises the uneven communicative field in which Arab and Western actors operate and provides the conceptual foundation for the comparative analysis that follows.

### 3.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates the four theoretical perspectives—framing theory, soft power, critical geopolitics, and platform geopolitics—into a unified model for analysing mega-events as instruments of geopolitical communication. By connecting the communicative, symbolic, and structural dimensions of power, the framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to interpret how Arab and Global North states construct narratives, negotiate legitimacy, and compete for international visibility.

At its foundation, the framework rests on three interlinked assumptions. *First*, mega-events function as performative arenas in which states stage geopolitical identity and craft narratives to shape global perception and legitimacy (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Roche, 2000; Ó Tuathail, 1996). These performances are intentional political acts designed to project modernity, authority, or cultural leadership. *Second*, narrative construction operates through soft power mechanisms in which attraction, credibility, and symbolic capital determine the persuasive impact of mega-events (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2010). Mega-events become sites where states convert cultural displays, diplomatic messaging, and public rituals into reputational gains—or losses—depending on how narratives are framed and received (Grix & Brannagan, 2023).

*Third*, the diffusion, circulation, and reception of these narratives take place within platform-mediated communication environments shaped by algorithms, data infrastructures, and global platform governance (DeNardis & Hackl, 2015; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Poell & Nieborg, 2023). These digital systems privilege certain languages, sources, and geographies, creating structural asymmetries that condition whose narratives gain visibility. Within this framework, framing theory functions as the interpretive mechanism linking message construction to audience perception. Governments and event organizers strategically select and emphasize themes—such as sustainability, innovation, inclusion, or national pride—to position themselves within global hierarchies of meaning (Entman, 1993; Lück et al., 2022). These frames circulate through media texts, official campaigns, and digital storytelling practices.

Soft power theory supplies the motivational dimension, explaining why states invest heavily in mega-events as symbolic projects. Hosts seek to accumulate international recognition, project credibility, and strengthen domestic legitimacy through curated images and cultural performances. Yet soft power remains fragile: competing actors, critical media, or contradictory frames can undermine narrative intentions. Critical geopolitics situates these communicative efforts within global spatial and symbolic hierarchies. It highlights how Arab states use mega-events to re-script peripherality and assert modernity, while Western states deploy them to reaffirm cultural authority and normative dominance (Mellor, 2023; Fischer, 2015; Møller & Petersen, 2023).

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

The platform geopolitics component captures how these performances unfold in digital environments that both democratize and restrict communication. Algorithms, platform rules, and attention economies determine which narratives gain prominence and which remain marginalized (Thussu, 2023; Kumar & Donovan, 2023). Bringing these elements together, the framework conceptualizes geopolitical communication as a cyclical process:

*Framing* → *Narrative Construction* → *Legitimacy Building* → *Platform-Mediated Visibility* → *Reinforced or Contested Power*.

This sequence demonstrates that mega-event communication is simultaneously strategic (shaped by state agency) and structural (shaped by platform infrastructures and global hierarchies). The conceptual framework therefore provides a robust analytical foundation for comparing how Arab and Global North states use mega-events to navigate and contest the global visibility regime.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Geopolitical Communication through Mega-Events

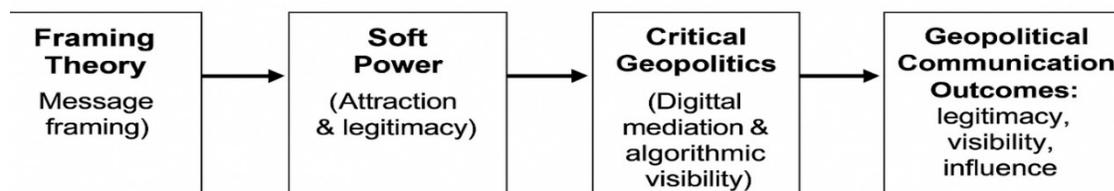


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Geopolitical Communication through Mega-Events

This conceptual framework illustrates how four interconnected theoretical perspectives—Framing Theory, Soft Power, Critical Geopolitics, and Platform Geopolitics—interact to produce geopolitical communication outcomes. The horizontal flow represents the process through which message framing, attraction and legitimacy, spatial hierarchy, and digital mediation collectively generate visibility, legitimacy, and influence.

1. *Framing Theory (Message Framing)*: Explains how narratives and meanings are constructed to shape audience perception and interpretation of mega-events.

2. *Soft Power (Attraction and Legitimacy)*: Examines how states use culture, values, and image to influence international audiences and build legitimacy.

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

3. *Critical Geopolitics (Spatial and Symbolic Hierarchies)*: Analyzes how space, territory, and representation reinforce or contest global power hierarchies.

4. *Platform Geopolitics (Digital Mediation and Algorithmic Visibility)*: Shows how digital platforms, data systems, and algorithms mediate geopolitical visibility and information flows.

5. *Geopolitical Communication Outcomes*: The convergence of these processes leads to outcomes in legitimacy, visibility, and influence—key elements of soft power communication in a globalized media environment

## METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employed a comparative qualitative research design to analyse how Arab and Global North states use mega-events as instruments of geopolitical communication. Combining a systematic literature review with case-based thematic analysis, the design enabled both analytical depth and cross-regional comparison—capturing how meaning-making differs across political, cultural, and technological contexts. Comparative qualitative research is particularly effective for identifying patterned similarities and contrasts in communication practices across diverse settings (Hantrais, 2022; Silverman, 2023).

Six mega-events were purposefully selected for analysis based on three criteria:

- *Global visibility and symbolic magnitude*: Each event generated substantial international media coverage and diplomatic relevance.
- *Regional representation*: Inclusion of Arab and Western hosts to reflect global asymmetries in visibility and soft power.
- *Availability of textual and digital data*: Presence of robust documentation, media coverage, and digital footprints enabling triangulated analysis.

The selected cases are:

- **Arab World**: Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup, Expo 2020 Dubai (UAE), and Saudi Arabia's Expo 2030 bid.
- **Global North**: London 2012 Olympics, Venice Biennale, and Paris 2024 Olympics.

This combination captures a spectrum from sporting to cultural mega-events and from established to emerging powers, offering a balanced comparative framework.

### 4.2 Data Collection

Data were drawn from three primary sources:

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

1. *Official materials*—press releases, promotional campaigns, and policy documents related to the selected events.
2. *Media coverage*—news articles and feature reports from regional and international outlets (e.g., *Al Jazeera*, *Gulf News*, *BBC*, *Reuters*, *The Guardian*).
3. *Digital platforms*—social media posts, YouTube videos, and online engagement metrics to trace visibility and framing.

In addition, a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed academic publications (2010–2024) was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. The review identified theoretical and empirical studies on mega-events, media spectacles, soft power, and Arab communication systems. Search strings included combinations such as “*mega-events AND soft power*,” “*Arab media AND visibility*,” “*sports diplomacy*,” and “*geopolitical communication*.” The literature review process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al. 2021) to ensure transparency and reproducibility. To ensure transparency and replicability, the systematic review adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The following flow diagram (Figure 2) summarizes the process of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review

The PRISMA Flow Diagram illustrates the process of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies used in the systematic literature review for this article. The flow chart follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al. 2021).

#### ■ Identification

Records identified through database searching (n = 562)

Records after duplicates removed (n = 497)



#### ■ Screening

Records screened (n = 497)

Records excluded (n = 412)



#### ■ Eligibility

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 85)

Full-text articles excluded (n = 38)



#### ■ Inclusion

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 47)

***Textual summary (for context):***

- Records identified through database searching (n = 562)
- Records after duplicates removed (n = 497)
- Records screened (n = 497)
- Records excluded (n = 412)
- Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 85)
- Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 47)

### *4.3 Data Analysis*

The analytical process combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis using NVivo 14 software. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical constructs—*framing, legitimacy, soft power, visibility, and platform mediation*—while inductive coding identified emergent themes unique to each case. Analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. *Descriptive coding* of textual and digital materials to identify dominant narratives and frames.
2. *Pattern coding* to group related frames under higher-order categories such as “modernity,” “inclusivity,” and “sustainability.”
3. *Comparative synthesis* to examine how these themes varied between Arab and Western cases.

To enhance reliability, two independent coders analysed 20% of the dataset. Intercoder reliability achieved a Cohen’s kappa of 0.84, indicating strong agreement (Miles et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2022). Analytical rigor was further strengthened through methodological triangulation, cross-referencing official discourse, media framing, and digital platform data.

### *4.4 Ethical Considerations*

The study relied exclusively on publicly available materials and did not involve human participants, thus requiring no institutional review board approval. Nevertheless, ethical principles of academic integrity and accurate representation were upheld. Direct quotations from official or media sources are properly attributed to preserve context and meaning.

### *4.5 Methodological Contribution*

This methodological approach provides an innovative bridge between communication studies, critical geopolitics, and digital platform research. By integrating systematic review with comparative case analysis, the study contributes a novel methodological bridge between communication studies and critical geopolitics. This approach allows examination of both structural (platform and power hierarchies) and discursive (framing and narrative) elements of

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

mega-events. It further aligns with the *Arab Media & Society* tradition of qualitative depth, interdisciplinarity, and regional grounding (Sakr 2020; El-Issawi 2021).

The methodological design thus provides a replicable framework for analysing how global communication infrastructures shape symbolic competition between emerging and established powers. By integrating PRISMA-guided systematic review with comparative thematic analysis, the study offers:

- A replicable analytical model for investigating mega-events as geopolitical communication platforms.
- A dual focus on discursive (framing, soft power narratives) and structural (platform governance, media hierarchies) dimensions.
- An approach aligned with contemporary Arab media scholarship emphasizing qualitative depth, regional context, and interdisciplinarity (El-Issawi, 2022; Sakr, 2020).

The methodological design thus advances the study of mega-events as sites where global communication infrastructures shape symbolic competition between emerging and dominant powers.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the comparative thematic analysis. Findings are organised into two overarching categories: (1) *Arab World Mega-Events*, characterised by legitimacy-seeking communication; and (2) *Global North Mega-Events*, defined by dominance-maintaining communication. Across both regions, mega-events function as communicative stages where states perform identity, negotiate visibility, and contest symbolic hierarchies within global media system.

### 5.1 Arab World Mega-Events: Performing Legitimacy and Modernity

*5.1.1 Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup: Countering Stereotypes through Inclusion*

The Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup marked a significant milestone in the evolution of Arab soft power. Official communication framed the event around themes of *legacy, unity, cultural pride, and inclusion*, positioning Qatar as simultaneously Arab, modern, and globally integrated (Dorsey, 2022; Mellor, 2023). The slogan “*Now is All*” encapsulated this positioning—emphasising both cultural continuity and innovation. Regional media narratives highlighted hospitality, technological capability, and sustainability, foregrounding initiatives such as carbon-neutral stadiums, advanced cooling systems, and new transport infrastructure (Hassan, 2021). Western media, however, often reframed the event through discourses of labour rights, migrant worker conditions, and human rights concerns—producing a clash between Qatar’s aspirational framing and global scepticism.

Digital platforms intensified this discursive contestation. Hashtags such as *#Qatar2022Legacy* and *#BoycottQatar2022* circulated simultaneously, revealing the platform-mediated struggle over visibility. Influencer engagement, strategic partnerships with FIFA and

*Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.*

the UN, and coordinated digital storytelling helped Qatar shift parts of the narrative toward cultural inclusivity and regional representation. Ultimately, the event served as a communicative battleground for redefining Arab visibility within global discourse.

### *5.1.2 Expo 2020 Dubai: Bridging East and West through Innovation*

Held in 2021–2022 due to COVID-19 delays, Expo 2020 Dubai embodied the UAE’s ambition to present itself as a global hub of innovation, sustainability, and multicultural dialogue. The theme “*Connecting Minds, Creating the Future*” framed the Expo as a collaborative platform for technological progress and cross-cultural exchange (Sakr, 2020; El-Issawi, 2021). Official discourse and global media coverage emphasised three core pillars—innovation, sustainability, and gender inclusivity—aligning the UAE with international development agendas. Pavilion architecture, immersive digital exhibitions, and curated storytelling further reinforced Dubai’s image as a neutral mediator between East and West (Mellor, 2023).

The hybrid digital–physical format significantly expanded reach. Virtual tours, livestreamed events, and multi-platform engagement attracted global audiences, enabling Dubai to manage narrative visibility more effectively than in traditional media ecosystems. Social media analytics revealed that positive themes—innovation, futurism, collaboration—dominated online discourse, indicating successful narrative management. Overall, Expo 2020 Dubai performed a diplomacy of innovation, allowing the UAE to project competence and cosmopolitanism while navigating sensitive geopolitical contexts.

### *5.1.3 Saudi Expo 2030 Bid: Future Cities and the Vision 2030 Paradigm*

Saudi Arabia’s Expo 2030 bid, launched under the theme “*The Era of Change: Together for a Foresighted Tomorrow*,” reflects the communicative ethos of *Vision 2030*: modernisation, diversification, and global integration. Promotional materials foregrounded youth empowerment, sustainability, technological innovation, and a transformation narrative aligning with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s modernization agenda (Mellor, 2023). Distinct from Qatar and Dubai, Saudi Arabia’s strategy placed greater emphasis on digital storytelling, data visualisation, and future city models (e.g., NEOM). This shift signals a movement from traditional spectacle toward networked and algorithmically optimised performance. Regional media framed the bid as a symbol of Arab ambition and unity, while Western media adopted a more cautious tone, questioning reform narratives and feasibility. Despite mixed reception, the bid represents an emerging phase of Arab mega-event diplomacy—one centred on long-term transformation rather than short-term spectacle.

## *5.2 Global North Mega-Events: Reproducing Cultural Dominance*

### *5.2.1 London 2012 Olympics: Diversity as Soft Power Continuity*

The London 2012 Olympics framed Britain as an inclusive, creative, and globally connected society. The opening ceremony’s tribute to the National Health Service, literature, and

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

multiculturalism served as a reaffirmation of British liberal identity (Tomlinson 2010; Boyle 2012). This narrative of diversity functioned as a *continuity frame*—maintaining legitimacy rather than seeking it. Media analysis showed that Western audiences interpreted London 2012 as a confident reassertion of soft power rooted in cultural maturity and institutional stability (Brown 2015). The event demonstrated how established powers convert symbolic capital into ongoing legitimacy, reinforcing perceptions of leadership in global governance and values.

### 5.2.2 Venice Biennale: Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Centrality

The Venice Biennale, one of the oldest and most prestigious art festivals, continues to epitomise Western cultural centrality. Through its national pavilion model, the Biennale reproduces an implicit geopolitical hierarchy—privileging certain nations as arbiters of taste and innovation (Miles 2017). The 2022 edition, titled *“The Milk of Dreams,”* reflected on imagination, bodies, and technology, but also underscored Europe’s enduring control over global art discourse. Arab and African pavilions were often celebrated for their novelty, yet their representation remained filtered through Western curatorial structures (Krzyzanowski 2018). Thus, while the Biennale provides visibility to non-Western artists, it simultaneously consolidates European soft power by defining the parameters of cultural legitimacy. It remains a communicative mechanism for maintaining symbolic dominance through aesthetic authority.

### 5.2.3 Paris 2024 Olympics: Sustainability and the Politics of Continuity

The Paris 2024 Olympics showcases how Western mega-events increasingly merge soft power with moral universalism. Promotional narratives foreground sustainability, gender equality, and climate responsibility, positioning France as a leader in global ethical governance (Fischer, 2015). The branding slogan *“Games Wide Open”* highlights France’s attempt to blend historical identity with future-oriented values. Digital and traditional media amplified narratives of environmental responsibility and social inclusion, reinforcing European cultural leadership. Paris 2024 thus transforms sustainability into a geopolitical frame, enabling France to reassert its global normative authority.

## 5.3 Comparative Insights: Divergent Logics of Communication

The comparative analysis reveals two distinct communicative logics:

### 1. Arab Mega-Events: Legitimacy-Seeking Communication

- Aim to construct credibility, recognition, and modernity
- Emphasise innovation, inclusivity, transformation, and cosmopolitanism
- Operate within asymmetric media and platform structures
- Use spectacle to challenge representational marginalisation

## 2. *Western Mega-Events: Dominance-Maintaining Communication*

- Reaffirm existing prestige and symbolic authority
- Emphasise continuity, heritage, sustainability, and moral leadership
- Reinforce global cultural hierarchies
- Use mega-events to maintain epistemic and normative power

Across both regions, findings confirm that visibility is the core currency of geopolitical legitimacy. Arab states deploy mega-events to claim representational equality and reshape global narratives, while Western states leverage them to consolidate cultural dominance. These patterns validate the conceptual framework's assertion that mega-events are performative, persuasive, and platform-mediated arenas of geopolitical power.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the comparative findings through the integrated theoretical framework—framing theory, soft power, critical geopolitics, and platform geopolitics—to demonstrate how mega-events operate as communicative rituals that both reflect and reproduce global hierarchies of visibility. Three interlinked dimensions emerge: (1) legitimacy as performance, (2) mediated visibility and platform asymmetry, and (3) symbolic economies of soft power.

### 6.1 *Legitimacy as Performance*

The findings show that mega-events serve as *performative arenas* where states stage narratives of identity, credibility, and modernity. In Arab mega-events, legitimacy is enacted as an *achievement* rather than a pre-existing attribute. Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia use mega-events to project themselves as modern, capable, and globally integrated—mobilising built infrastructure (stadiums, pavilions, cultural districts), digital campaigns, and symbolic imagery as communicative artefacts (Mellor, 2023; Sakr, 2020). Such performances seek to reposition Arab states within global hierarchies by countering stereotypes and asserting technological and cultural competence.

In contrast, Western mega-events draw upon *institutionalised*, historically accumulated legitimacy. London 2012 and Paris 2024 reaffirm liberal identity and moral leadership through themes such as diversity, sustainability, and social inclusion—frames that sustain existing global authority rather than construct new credibility (Fischer, 2015; Tomlinson, 2010). Similarly, the Venice Biennale reproduces Europe's cultural centrality through aesthetic authority and curatorial power, reinforcing symbolic dominance (Miles, 2017). Thus, Arab hosts perform legitimacy to *gain recognition*, while Western hosts perform legitimacy to *affirm continuity*. This asymmetry illustrates how mega-events reproduce a layered geopolitical order in which recognition, credibility, and authority are distributed unevenly.

## 6.2 Mediated Visibility and Platform Asymmetry

Mega-events increasingly unfold within platformed communication environments, where visibility is shaped by algorithmic and infrastructural logics. While digital platforms create opportunities for states to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, they also embed new forms of structural inequality. Arab mega-events rely heavily on digital storytelling, influencers, AI-driven promotional campaigns, and coordinated social media strategies to build visibility and counter Western media dominance (El-Issawi, 2021). However, platforms such as X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube privilege Anglophone content, Western news outlets, and algorithmically “trusted” sources. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue, this creates a form of *data colonialism*, where attention and legitimacy flow unevenly across geopolitical contexts.

The result is a persistent paradox: visibility without authority. Arab narratives may trend globally, but their interpretation remains vulnerable to reframing through Western media logics, platform biases, and entrenched global discourses. Conversely, Western mega-events benefit from infrastructural centrality. Their narratives are reinforced by dominant media ecosystems, platform partnerships, and long-standing global cultural influence. Paris 2024, for example, leveraged algorithm-friendly themes of sustainability and inclusivity—values that platforms privilege due to their universal appeal and alignment with corporate brand identities. Thus, platform geopolitics shapes the communicative field in uneven ways: Arab visibility is often conditional and contested, while Western visibility is amplified and legitimised by default.

## 6.3 Soft Power and Symbolic Economies

Soft power emerges in this study as a relational and unevenly distributed resource. For Western nations, soft power functions as maintenance capital—a means of preserving established prestige, institutional credibility, and normative leadership (Nye, 2008). Mega-events such as the Olympics sustain this symbolic economy by reaffirming continuity, heritage, and universalist values. For Arab states, however, soft power operates as transformational capital—a tool for re-signifying national identity, increasing global visibility, and expanding symbolic boundaries (Dorsey, 2022; Cornelissen, 2010). Mega-events such as Qatar 2022 and Expo 2020 Dubai become strategic interventions aimed at reshaping global narratives and asserting new geopolitical roles. These efforts, however, remain structurally constrained by global media hierarchies and platform-based asymmetries.

The findings further point to a shift in the Arab region from material spectacle—physical infrastructure, architecture, and monumental scale—to networked spectacle—digital storytelling, immersive experiences, and algorithmically optimised communication. Saudi Arabia’s Expo 2030 bid exemplifies this transition by emphasising data-driven visualisation and futuristic urban narratives. This evolution underscores the increasing significance of platformed legitimacy, where global recognition depends not only on cultural performance but also on a state’s capacity to navigate digital infrastructures and algorithmic visibility. In this emerging

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

symbolic economy, the power to be seen—and to shape how visibility is interpreted—has become a central axis of geopolitical influence.

#### 6.4 Table 1: Comparative Overview of Mega-Events

This table provides a comparative summary of six mega-events analysed in the study, highlighting their narrative frames, communicative goals, dominant media, and overall outcomes.

Region/Event	Core Narrative Frame	Communicative Goal	Dominant Medium	Outcome
Qatar 2022	Inclusion, legacy, Arab pride	Legitimacy-seeking	Broadcast + social media	Partial narrative shift; contested legitimacy
Expo 2020 Dubai	Innovation, collaboration	Diplomacy of innovation	Digital hybrid media	Enhanced reputation; sustained engagement
Saudi Expo 2030	Future cities, transformation	Vision 2030 legitimation	Data-driven storytelling	Emerging narrative credibility
London 2012	Diversity, continuity	Leadership reaffirmation	Broadcast + institutional media	Consolidated soft power
Venice Biennale	Cultural authority	Aesthetic dominance	Art world networks	Maintained Western centrality
Paris 2024	Sustainability, inclusion	Moral universalism	Digital + traditional	Reinforced global virtue narrative

#### Table 2. Theoretical Framework, Findings, and Contributions Matrix

This table links the theoretical frameworks applied in the study to their analytical focus, empirical insights, and knowledge contributions. It demonstrates how each theoretical lens contributes to understanding mega-events as communicative systems of geopolitical power.

Framework	Analytical Focus	Empirical Insight	Knowledge Contribution
Framing Theory (Entman 1993)	Message construction and narrative emphasis	Arab states frame innovation and inclusivity; Western states frame continuity and leadership	Frames reveal legitimacy-seeking vs. dominance-maintaining communication

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

Soft Power (Nye 2004; Anholt 2010)	Attraction and reputation	Arab events seek recognition; Western events reinforce prestige	Soft power operates asymmetrically as transformation vs. maintenance capital
Critical Geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 1996)	Spatial and symbolic hierarchy	Arab hosts re-script peripherality; Western hosts reaffirm centrality	Geopolitical communication manifests performance as of legitimacy
Platform Geopolitics (DeNardis and Hackl 2015)	Digital mediation and visibility	Platforms amplify existing hierarchies	Visibility without authority as a condition of digital globalisation

## CONCLUSION

Mega-events have evolved into complex communicative infrastructures through which states perform legitimacy, negotiate visibility, and contest global hierarchies of meaning. This comparative study of six emblematic cases—from Qatar 2022, Expo 2020 Dubai, and Saudi Arabia’s Expo 2030 bid to London 2012, the Venice Biennale, and Paris 2024—demonstrates that mega-events function as geopolitical texts that encode national aspirations, values, and strategies of soft power within an increasingly mediatized world.

For Arab states, mega-events represent strategic opportunities to reconstruct global narratives and articulate images of innovation, inclusivity, and cosmopolitan modernity. They embody what this study terms aspirational legitimacy—the pursuit of recognition within a global media environment historically shaped by Orientalist framings and geopolitical marginalisation. Yet, these communicative efforts remain conditioned by Western-dominated media infrastructures and platform logics that mediate visibility through algorithmic biases and discursive hierarchies. Conversely, mega-events in the Global North operate within contexts of institutionalised legitimacy, drawing upon historically accumulated symbolic capital and cultural authority. Western hosts are able to convert continuity, heritage, and universalist values—such as sustainability, diversity, and artistic leadership—into reaffirmations of soft power. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue, Western actors benefit from infrastructural centrality, enjoying privileged positions in shaping global communicative norms and attention flows.

*Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.*

By integrating framing theory, soft power, critical geopolitics, and platform geopolitics, this study advances a holistic understanding of how media, space, and digital infrastructures converge to shape geopolitical communication. It concludes that the future effectiveness of soft power will depend less on spectacular displays and more on a state's ability to navigate and influence the digital architectures that govern global visibility. For Arab states, this requires transforming episodic visibility into sustained epistemic authority within global discourse. Mega-events are no longer merely cultural celebrations; they are strategic communicative performances embedded within complex geopolitical and platformed environments. For Arab states, the challenge lies in leveraging these events not only for visibility but for durable legitimacy and global voice. For Western states, sustaining leadership requires adapting universalist narratives to a more multipolar and digitally networked world. Across contexts, narrative construction, infrastructural participation, and platform governance will shape the emerging geopolitics of visibility in the digital age.

## **Recommendations**

This subsection provides explicit, actionable recommendations for future research, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars conducting similar analyses.

### *a. Research Recommendations*

1. *Expand comparative samples* across regions such as East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America to assess whether legitimacy-seeking and dominance-maintaining logics hold globally.
2. *Investigate post-event legacy communication* by analysing how narratives evolve months or years after mega-events.
3. *Examine audience reception* through digital ethnography or computational social science approaches to map public sentiment and narrative diffusion.
4. *Analyse the role of AI-driven communication*, including generative content and algorithmic curation, in shaping geopolitical narratives of mega-events.
5. *Study the political economy of platform infrastructures*, focusing on how partnerships between states and platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Meta) influence visibility.

### *b. Policy Recommendations for Arab States Navigating Platform Asymmetries*

1. *Develop platform diplomacy strategies* that engage directly with global tech companies to enhance regional representation and reduce algorithmic bias.
2. *Invest in multilingual digital ecosystems*, especially Arabic, English, French, and Spanish content, to diversify global reach.
3. *Strengthen regional media collaborations* (e.g., GCC media councils) to coordinate narratives across multiple mega-events and avoid fragmented messaging.
4. *Promote transparent labour, environmental, and governance practices*, as credibility increasingly shapes international reception on digital platforms.

Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.

5. *Build sustainable cultural infrastructures*, ensuring mega-event visibility translates into long-term influence rather than event-specific attention spikes.

*c. Practical Guidelines for Leveraging Digital Infrastructures in Mega-Event Communication*

1. *Adopt data-driven storytelling*, using analytics to tailor content to diverse global audiences.
2. *Use real-time digital engagement*—live streams, hashtag campaigns, influencer partnerships—to manage narratives proactively.
3. *Create platform-optimised content ecosystems* (short-form videos, interactive experiences, virtual tours) to maximise algorithmic distribution.
4. *Coordinate crisis communication protocols* to address narrative disruptions, misinformation, and reputational threats during events.
5. *Prioritise accessibility and inclusivity*, ensuring digital content is multilingual and culturally sensitive to diverse publics.

*d. Methodological Recommendations for Scholars*

1. *Integrate computational and qualitative methods*, such as sentiment analysis, network mapping, and thematic coding, to capture both depth and scale.
2. *Apply PRISMA rigorously* in literature reviews of media and communication research to enhance transparency and replicability.
3. *Incorporate platform geopolitics* into communication research frameworks to account for algorithmic mediation.
4. *Adopt multi-modal data sources*, including visual, textual, and interactional content from digital platforms.
5. *Conduct longitudinal studies* to analyse how mega-event narratives evolve over time across different media ecosystems.

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*Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.*

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*Dr. Tommy Kibera Kiilu | Mega-Events And Geopolitical Communication: Arab And Global North Strategies Of Visibility And Soft Power.*

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