

“Life is more important than football”: Comparative analysis of Tweets and Facebook comments regarding the cancellation of the 2015 African Cup of Nations in Morocco

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Abstract

This study analyzes comments from two major social media, Facebook and Twitter, regarding the controversial cancellation of the 2015 African Cup of Nations (CAN) in Morocco and its transfer to Equatorial Guinea, a move precipitated by the contemporaneous outbreaks of Ebola in West Africa. Using frame analysis methodology (frames being the central ideas structuring a narrative account of an issue, event or controversy), it investigates how the sporting and health worlds are understood and conceptualized on Twitter and Facebook, in the context of a specific event. We also investigated the extent to which these frames are platform-specific. Data were collected by keyword extraction and submitted to a qualitative thematic and frame analysis, from which we identified six frames (Epidemic management, Sporting event, Political, Skepticism, Religion, and Economic). Analysis of these frames identified a number of classic issues from the sociology of not only football and epidemics but also of African political issues. The cancellation of the CAN thus provides an excellent window into the complex links between sport, health

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and politics. Indeed, the online comments of social media users expressed a rich range of pre-existing frustrations, beliefs and political positions. Our results show that, in the context of the cancellation of the 2015 CAN, tweets mostly framed the event as an epidemic management issue, while Facebook comments typically framed it as an epidemic management, sporting and political event. Some themes treated in a factual way on Twitter became politicized on Facebook where, in addition, new political themes emerged. We conclude that studying social media conversations relating to a mega-sporting event could provide sociologically valuable insights about topics not typically directly associated with sport or health.

Keywords

African Cup of Nation, Ebola, epidemic management, football, Facebook, qualitative thematic analysis, rhetorical frame analysis, soccer, social media, Twitter

Introduction

Studies on the use of social media are increasingly frequent in the sociology of sport. Indeed, the global reach and intensive use of these media (Kemp, 2017) provides a vast, multi-faceted data corpus that is international in scope. Additionally, fans use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to access information about athletes or clubs that is not available from traditional media (Clavio and Walsh, 2014). Analysis of social media posts can thus provide new insights into the information consumption habits of fans. Moreover, social media allow for what Allard and Vandenberghe (2003) call an “expressive individualism.” According to these authors, social media accounts are associated with a desire for public visibility and self-affirmation, often through a mix of narratives involving both one’s private life and one’s public face. We share the opinion that the success of these platforms can be explained by individuals’ desire to have social relations that are less formal and more direct, but also less regulated than those using other modes of communication (Wouters, 2007). The physical disconnect between those who post and those who read the post facilitates uninhibited expression of authentic sentiments, allowing social media analytics to gain a great deal of data about different groups of social media users (Azucar et al., 2018; Bai et al., 2014; Chester and Bretherton, 2007; Hongladarom, 2011; Settanni et al., 2018).

Moreover, the corpus of social media content related to sport is particularly rich, with online platforms not merely providing channels for propaganda or marketing (they do both), but also allowing freewheeling exchange of ideas and debates (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013). In this respect, many authors have underlined social media’s role as a channel of alternative discourse, including discourses of resistance in the field of sport (McGillivray, 2014, 2017). These include resistance to gender stereotypes (Pegoraro et al., 2018; Sanderson and Gramlich, 2016); to racist discourse (Cleland, 2014); and to the pervasive commercial branding of teams, leagues and individual athletes (Popp et al., 2016). Discourses on football transmitted by traditional media outlets can be discussed and contested on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, making social media a space for polemics (Mercier, 2015).

The richness of data available in sport-related content on social media was demonstrated in our analysis of tweets and Facebook comments about the 2015 Africa Cup of

Nations (CAN), a sporting event cancelled by the original host country, Morocco, due to fears about the Ebola virus. This not only caused the event to be urgently moved to Equatorial Guinea, but also resulted in the decision of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to exclude Morocco from the CAN in 2017 and 2019. This article demonstrates that the meaning invested in the cancellation of the CAN relies on frames that go beyond the fields of sport and health: rather, the political aspect of this event was highlighted by social media users, who conceptualized it in a manner that resonated with pre-existing beliefs, frustrations and politics.

Football as a cultural object

Football has often been investigated sociologically and anthropologically through research among its supporters, with studies typically articulated around three themes: (a) violence in and around stadiums, including hooliganism, a phenomenon which recent research has revealed to be highly complex and consequently requiring a certain critical distance when the term is used (Kossakowski, 2017); (b) identification with a club or a group of organized supporters (Evans and Norcliffe, 2016); and (c) politicization of supporters according to political and economic contexts, e.g. racism in the stands (Kennedy, 2013) or protests against political decisions (Daghan, 2016). These studies on the phenomenon of supporterism—whether peaceful or violent—support the idea that football is a social and cultural object beyond the simple domain of sport. For example, sport cannot be reduced to a mere social safety valve (Elias and Dunning, 1998) or a political instrument for exerting social control over a large part of the population (Brohm and Perelman, 2006).

As per Donnelly (1995), three overarching theories in the field of sport sociology are used to explain the links between the sportive and social spheres. In the first theory, sport is the simple *reflection* of society. For example, acts of racism and discrimination in a sport are, according to this theory, a social mirror that reflects what is happening more widely in society. The second theory, *reproduction*, provides a more dynamic perspective in which sport is a space of rearticulation of social dynamics. In the case of racism, this theory does not view discriminatory practices in sport solely as the result of pre-existing social inequalities in society. Rather, it holds that sport can itself be an instrument of legitimization which reproduces certain forms of racism present in society. Finally, the theory of *resistance* postulates that sport is a possible terrain for contestation and social change, as exemplified by the raised fists and black gloves of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City (Moreau, 2008), which shows that sport can also combine with political advocacy.

Our conceptualization of sport borrows from each of these three theories. In the case of football, as noted by Bromberger et al. (1995), sport allows various pre-existing sources of tension (political, religious, social, and territorial) to be reactivated, thus simultaneously being a reflection of certain tensions (as seen in Europe both on the football pitches and in the stands), while actively contributing to the dissemination of racial stereotypes. Nevertheless, football can also embody a form of resistance to racism, as seen in the campaigns “Stand up, Speak up” (Alleyne, 2011) and “Show Racism the Red Card” (Dixon et al., 2016).

The case of the 2015 CAN cancellation

Our study analyzes an event situated at the crossroads of sport and health: the cancellation of Morocco's hosting of the 2015 CAN at a time when Ebola outbreaks were active in several African countries. It is sociologically useful to focus on this type of event at the intersection of two worlds that have many points in common in their social dynamics, such as "othering" and (re)production of racist dynamics (Alcabes, 2009; Atlani-Duault et al., 2015; Moreau, 2008; Kassimeris, 2008). Additionally, sporting competition achievements and epidemic management successes are often socially conceptualized as a reflection of personal or national competence, thus relating to phenomena such as heroization and positive in-group identification (Roy et al., 2020, submitted; Grix and Kramareva, 2017). As such, the study of a "crossroads" event can shed light on social dynamics that straddle and even go beyond the fields directly concerned.

Framing the CAN

To analyze the Twitter and Facebook comments posted in response to the cancellation of the CAN in Morocco, we rely on the concept of frames, typically attributed to Goffman (1974) and referring to a structured understanding on which individuals rely to make sense of people, situations and activities. Nevertheless, this concept has, since its inception, been developed and modified by several authors (Kuypers, 2010; Kyriakides, 2017).

The concept of frames typically invites us to consider the plurality of interpretations surrounding an event. In the context of this study, we rely on the rhetorical frame analysis perspective (Kuypers, 2010; Kyriakides, 2017). According to this understanding of the concept, frames are the central idea structuring a narrative account of an issue or event. Framing is thus the process of organizing, defining and constructing a social issue (its causes, its moral standing and the solutions that should be implemented) from a particular perspective. By highlighting certain elements and keeping others in the shadows (Entman, 2007; Kuypers, 2010; Reese, 2010), communicators encourage the facts of a situation to be interpreted and conceptualized by others in a particular manner (Orsini, 2017). Frames thus have a meaning-shaping role and are purposive, in the sense that they are reasoned and not randomly selected by communicators. By calling for specific interventions, they promote interests, whether they be social, financial, political or personal. The CAN, due to its locality at the crossroads of the sportive and health fields, is an ambiguous event in which many different frames can structure the meanings invested in it. In the context of this study, we are thus interested in frames, specifically those shared via social media platforms.

Research objectives

Our study aimed to answer the following research question: How was the 2015 cancellation of the CAN in Morocco and its move to Equatorial Guinea framed in Twitter and Facebook comments? More specifically, we investigated the following two questions: (a) What were the main frames used by Twitter and Facebook users to make sense of the cancellation of the CAN?; and (b) to what extent were these frames platform-specific?

Methodology

Twitter, with over 330 million active users each month (Journal du Net, 2019), and Facebook, with more than two billion (Tual, 2017) are two of the most frequently-used social media in the world and, therefore, important objects for our study. In addition, they are complementary platforms. Twitter is used more often to relay “serious” information—notably from the so-called traditional media and other social media—by users more qualified and with higher-than-average social positions, while Facebook features more of an equal mix of content, including “popular” categories encompassing both seriousness and humour (or information and entertainment) (Hermida et al., 2012; Matsa and Shearer, 2018; Mercier et al., 2018). This explains our methodological choice to analyze each platform separately.

Data extraction

Tweets were collected using keyword extraction processes. The keywords used were “Ebola” and “CAN.” Care was taken to exclude messages using the verb “can.” The tweets ($n = 31,870$) containing both keywords were collected in French and English. After clearing the database of duplicates and retweets, 1994 tweets remained (Figure 1).

Facebook comments were associated with media articles. Twenty international media outlets were included in a final list, based on global and national popularity rankings. We then collected all articles containing the keywords “Ebola” and “CAN” published during the collection period ($n = 506$) and proceeded to extract Facebook comments posted in response to these articles. Only posts directly commenting on media articles were collected; responses to comments (“replies”) were not. These comments were either posted via the Facebook application used on the media websites or on the media’s Facebook pages (see Figure 2).

All tweets and Facebook comments were extracted without any personal data (username, geolocation, Internet Protocol address, etc.) to preserve the anonymity of the users. Nevertheless, this anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed because all collected comments were publicly available at the time of data collection.

Data analysis

We began with a qualitative thematic analysis of tweets and Facebook comments without predetermined categories, that is, a purely inductive approach. Our analysis also considered the quantitative dimension of social media comments. Thus, the frequency of categories appearing in tweets and Facebook comments has been considered in our analysis (our approach allowed for Facebook comments or tweets to be counted several times due to the polysemy of the posts), as we postulate that a theme has more weight when it appears with greater frequency (Moreau et al., 2014). Nevertheless, this quantitative analysis supports the qualitative approach of our article and does not constitute a mixed analysis. Our analysis relied on a two-step process, the first being a thematic analysis and the second, a rhetorical frame analysis.

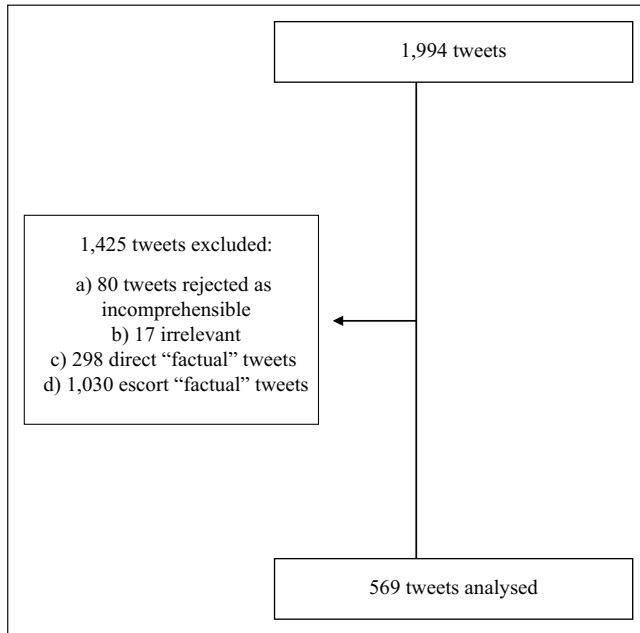


Figure 1. Procedure for extracting and analyzing data from Twitter.

We first relied on a thematic analysis. We associated an initial thematic code with each social media post using phrasing from the original comment, in order to reflect its literal meaning (Shepherd et al., 2015). We then undertook a re-categorization process (Nowell et al., 2017) that identified the underlying theme. This process included three re-categorization steps for tweets, reducing them from 86 initial categories down to 10 final themes (see Table 1). These final categories encompassed all initial categories while excluding those with fewer than five comments ($n = 16$). As for the Facebook comments, 107 initial categories were reduced to 14 themes (see Table 2) in two steps of re-categorization. We deleted 14 categories because they included fewer than five comments. Condensing raw data into broader categories, according to the themes used or created by social media users, allowed us to explore and summarize the content of social media conversations.

The second stage involved rhetorical frame analysis (Kuypers, 2010), in which we inductively identified the main argumentative positions and frames of the themes circulating online. While themes relate to the condensed *content* of social media posts, frames are defined as the organizing *structure* of comments. In a third and final step, we identified six frames that organized the conversations: political; economic; epidemic management; sporting event; skepticism; and religion.

Coding was done by the lead author in collaboration with the second author, and 30% of comments were subject to co-analysis. We use the term “co-analysis” because it was

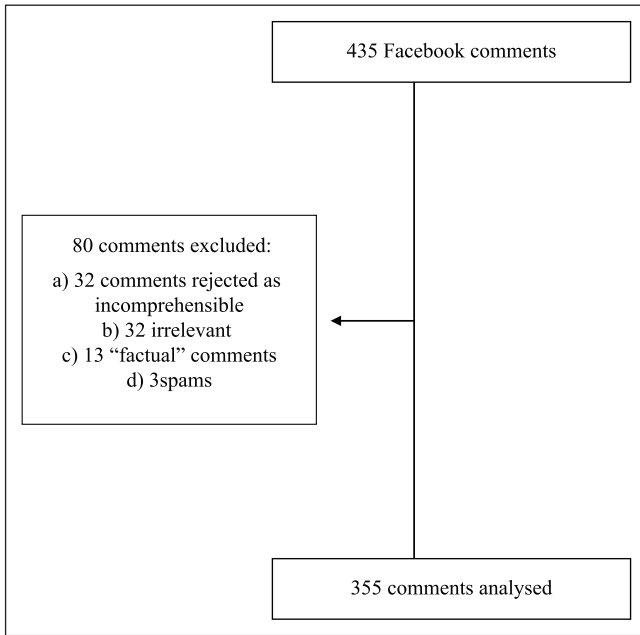


Figure 2. Procedure for extracting and analyzing data from Facebook.

Table 1. Themes and frames on Twitter.

| | Themes | Frames |
|------|---|---------------------|
| (1) | Health (fear of Ebola versus calls for calm) | Epidemic management |
| (2) | Strategies against Ebola (fight against Ebola and not wanting the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations) | Epidemic management |
| (3) | Support for Morocco | Epidemic management |
| (4) | Support for CAF | Epidemic management |
| (5) | Technical aspects of soccer | Sporting event |
| (6) | Morocco–Algeria rivalry | Sporting event |
| (7) | North Africa/Black Africa rivalry | Political |
| (8) | Criticism of the CAF | Political |
| (9) | Criticism of Morocco | Skepticism |
| (10) | Conspiracy theories | Skepticism |

Note: CAF, Confederation of African Football.

not just a matter of validating coding, but rather of discussing coding possibilities and their limitations (Smith and McGannon, 2018). Two rounds were necessary (proposal 1, counter-proposal 1, proposal 2, counter-proposal 2) to reach a consensus between the researchers.

Table 2. Themes and frames on Facebook.

| | Themes | Frames |
|------|---|---------------------|
| (1) | Health (fear of Ebola versus calls for calm) | Epidemic management |
| (2) | Strategies against Ebola (fight against Ebola and not wanting the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations) | Epidemic management |
| (3) | Support for Morocco | Epidemic management |
| (4) | Money | Economic |
| (5) | Technical aspects of soccer | Sporting event |
| (6) | Criticism of CAF | Political |
| (7) | Criticism of Morocco | Political |
| (8) | Support for CAF | Political |
| (9) | Racial rivalry | Political |
| (10) | Criticism of soccer international authorities | Political |
| (11) | Critic of government in power | Political |
| (12) | Criticism of Africa versus praise for Africa | Political |
| (13) | Affirmation of faith | Religion |
| (14) | Conspiracy theories | Skepticism |

Note: CAF, Confederation of African Football.

Results

Tweets

Our database initially included 1994 tweets, of which 569 were retained and analyzed in our study. Nearly two-thirds of the tweets ($n = 1328$, or 66.6%) were “factual,” meaning they either only mentioned a piece of factual information or shared a link to a website, with neither the tweet itself nor the website expressing a clear opinion (see Figure 1).

Examples of factual commentary are as follows:

BREAKING NEWS: Morocco has withdrawn their right of hosting AFCON 2015 due to outbreak of ebola virus #afcon (16-10-14; 12:52 PM).

Sports News • Ivory Coast will not play AFCON “Out of Ebola Outbreak. Full story at [Internet Link broken]. (07-11-14; 10:31 PM).

This result is not surprising because Twitter is generally understood as an information-relaying social media (Hermida, 2014). However, this left a significant number of tweets ($n = 569$) which expressed an analyzable opinion (see Figure 1). These were grouped into four frames: epidemic management; sporting event; political; and skepticism.

Epidemic management frame. The largest number of tweets ($n = 176$, 30.9%) expressed fear about Ebola and were therefore directly related to the epidemic:

Please don't allow AFCON¹ in our country, afraid of #Ebola some of us still wanna see our future (18-10-14, 09:00 AM)

Now they want us to go afcon so that Ebola can come here and bang us right in the pussy? (17-10-14, 10:11 AM)

This fear of Ebola provoked calls for calm, though these were less frequent ($n = 87$, 15.3%):

AfconEbolarisk 'undercontrol' [<https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30888646#worldnews%20%23bbc>] (19-01-15; 06:42 PM)

Organizers have calmed fears over the threat of Ebola at AFCON 2015 [Internet link broken] (15-01-14; 07:04 PM).

In this context of fear, two types of response seem to have emerged among social media users. The first was to actively fight against Ebola ($n = 65$, 11.4%):

All measures to help fight Ebola should be utilised humanity is at stake here. Postpone AFCON 2015 ppafcon2015 (19-10-14; 08:14 AM).

Forget hosting AFCON for now, focus on fighting Ebola: Sports Minister Mbalula Fikile [Internet link broken] (20-10-14; 12:18 PM).

The second response related to the refusal to host CAN in the commenter's own country ($n = 26$, 4.6%):

Finally, no CAN to casa [Casablanca, the economic capital of Morocco] has turned out to be a very good decision #EBOLA ☺☺☺ (18-08-14; 11:27 AM);

Besides, we do not want their #CAN Ebola (. . .). (15-11-14; 08:19 PM).

The Moroccan decision not to host the CAN was defended by a large number of users ($n = 67$, 11.8%), their arguments supporting Morocco's refusal relating almost exclusively to the protection of the population's health:

I think the withdrawal of Morocco from hosting an Afcon 2015 is a right decision due to Ebola virus (16-10-14; 10:45 AM);

Morocco is right not to participate in the CAN. They minimize the risk of Ebola contamination. 'Better to prevent than to heal' (15-11-14; 02:39 PM).

Paradoxically, the argument supporting the decision of the CAF to carry on with the CAN and sanction Morocco also focused on health, rather than on the need to support the game at all costs ($n = 9$, 1.6%):

Since the outbreak of #Ebola, CAF has acted in accordance with the World Health Organization's recommendations (03-11-14; 3:00 PM).

Sporting event frame. Some tweets were strictly limited to technical aspects of football ($n = 38$, 6.7%), mentioning Ebola only to explain certain issues specific to the game:

Aubameyang [Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is an international player from Gabon], he won't play there cuz dortmund don't want him because of ebola (14-11-14: 04:11 PM);

The Tunisians, they had a nice match tonight outside too bad the CAN 2015 is cancelled because of Ebola #Algeria. (10-10-14: 10:04 PM).

The schedule of the international football calendar was thus cited to argue against the Moroccan decision to withdraw from hosting the CAN. Additionally, a rivalry between Morocco and Algeria² ($n = 13$, 2.3%) emerged around the idea that Morocco feared it would lose against Algeria if the CAN took place, and Ebola served as a way out:

Morocco were so scared that Algeria might win #CAN in Morocco they have cancelled with the excuse #Ebola (11-11-14; 03:13 PM).

Political frame. While the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria was about sport, that between North Africa and the rest of Africa was political. Some comments on the rivalry between North Africa and "Black Africa" ($n = 8$, 1.4%) concerned race. The "Black Africans" accused the North Africans of racism and haughtiness towards them:

Now more than ever, North Africa is showing us that they think they are better than the rest of Africa. They wanna skip the AFCON coz of Ebola (17-10-14; 06:55 AM)

As for North Africans, they accused "Black Africans" of spreading the Ebola virus:

It's because of these coloured SOBs eating bats and monkeys, filled with microbes including Ebola, that Morocco won't host the CAN (11-11-14; 10:48 PM)

The tweets relating to criticism of the CAF ($n = 48$, 8.4%) were also framed from a political angle, usually relying on health, sport and political arguments:

Bye bye Issa Hayatou you're no welcomed in Morocco take your Afcon 2015 with you to your home country and as well as Ebola (08-11-14; 08:48 PM);

Understanding the mafia that is rife in the CAF we can understand this decision . . . Shame on the Orange Ebola CAN! (11-11-14; 11:01 PM).

Skepticism frame. While tweets supported Morocco's decision as being legitimized by health arguments, those that criticized this decision relied on a different frame, which we label as skeptical ($n = 42$, 7.9%). These comments: (a) simply questioned the "protection

Table 3. Frequency of frames on Facebook and on Twitter.

| | Frames | Number on Twitter | Number on Facebook |
|-----|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| (1) | Epidemic management | 430 (72.3%) | 166 (31.9%) |
| (2) | Sporting event | 38 (6.7%) | 138 (26.5%) |
| (3) | Political | 56 (9.4%) | 153 (29.4%) |
| (4) | Skepticism | 50 (8.4%) | 21 (4%) |
| (5) | Religion | 0 | 23 (4.4%) |
| (6) | Economic | 0 | 19 (3.6%) |

Note: the sum of tweets and Facebook comments is higher than the analyzed total due to the polysemic nature of some comments, which were coded in two frames.

of the population” argument without suggesting an alternative; and (b) mentioned that Morocco’s retention of the FIFA Club World Cup was a major contradiction:³

We all understand the threat of ebola, but Morocco cannot hold the African continent hostage because of their fears! #AFCON 2015 must go on (17-10-14: 11:23 AM);

So Morocco wants to host the FIFA Club World Cup in December, but do not want to host the AFCON in Jan because of Ebola (29-10-14: 10:28 PM).

Some netizens ($n = 8$, 1.4%) also propagated a conspiracy theory that the CAN in Morocco could not have been cancelled solely because of the Ebola virus:

No CAN or participation for Morocco? What is the motive? Do not tell me it’s Ebola. (11-11-14; 07:40 PM).

Facebook

Our Facebook database included 435 comments, 355 of which were analyzed for our study.

In contrast to tweets (see Figure 2), there were relatively few “factual” Facebook comments ($n = 13$, 3.7%). Examples included:

Yeah, of 54 African national teams 38 decided to skip AFCON 2015 (17-01-15; 02:21 PM; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/01/ebola-fear-overshadows-afcon-2015/>)

The categories mentioned in tweets (see Table 2) were also found within the Facebook data, with the exception of the Morocco–Algeria rivalry, which appeared only once. However, two issues are important to mention. First, the frames did not have the same weight on the two social networks (see Table 3). The epidemic management frame, which represented 69.7% of tweets, was much less present on Facebook (31.9%), while the technical aspects of football were widely discussed in the latter (32.1% of Facebook comments versus only 2.9% of tweets). Secondly, the focus of argumentation was different on the two platforms, with the discourse relying more on political frames on Facebook

than on Twitter. Our Facebook data also contained two frames, religion and economic, that were not reflected on Twitter.

Epidemic management frame. Comments reflecting the fear of Ebola were, unlike on Twitter, not numerous on Facebook ($n = 14$, 3.9%):

Do you know what an international sports group can be? Do you know how the virus behaves and the contagiousness of this disease??? Can you imagine managing tens of millions of people for an event like this? The virus has an incubation period of 20 days when it is not detectable, because no symptoms; it is true that it is not transmissible during this same period but once the carrier gets sick the disease contagion goes very fast (. . .) personally I will not go to such an event for anything in the world, and I believe that I'm not the only one to think so (. . .) (17-10-14; 12:02 PM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/512812.html>)

In contrast to this fear of transmission of the Ebola virus, we found a larger proportion ($n = 18$, 5.1%) of comments relativizing this issue:

There is no justification for any fear of Ebola since the football fans are only humans and not viruses. besides, the WHO [World Health Organization] and health authorities in the country would carry out adequate checks to isolate anyone with Ebola symptoms at the airports and sporting arenas (17-11-14; 08:11 AM; Internet link broken)

Although fear was less explicitly expressed on Facebook than on Twitter, the same two themes were evoked regarding the eradication of Ebola. The first relates to fighting the virus ($n = 76$, 21.4%):

A human life is priceless (. . .) protect our dear CONTINENT and its PEOPLE against this epidemic, and then we will see the result (. . .) (24-10-14; 09:58 AM (<http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>);

I want to know as a human being if we should fight this disease or let ourselves be defeated by this disease. I'm on the side of the fighters. Avoiding mass gatherings does not necessarily mean that it will stop the spread of the disease, from what we know about Ebola infection patterns. It may slow it but not stop it. (. . .) (24-10-14; 03:14 PM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>).

The second was to withdraw from or postpone the CAN ($n = 15$, 4.2%):

I think that the Ivory Coast should withdraw from CAN 2015 and wait for 2017. Life is more important than football. (01-09-14; 08:33 PM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/507700.html>).

Support for Morocco was more frequent on Facebook ($n = 43$, 12.1%):

Morocco has shown wisdom and responsibility. The principal vector in the pandemic spread of a virus is the movement of populations (. . .) (11-11-14; 04:43 PM; https://www.lemonde.fr/football/article/2014/11/11/la-can-2015-n-aura-pas-lieu-au-maroc_4521901_1616938.html);

It is all to the honor of Morocco that it does not want to put its population in danger by increasing the comings and goings of humans in times of super contagious epidemic, all for the sake of sport! (12-11-14; 08:27 PM; http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/football/article/2014/11/11/la-can-2015-n-aura-pas-lieu-au-maroc_4521901_1616938.html).

Sporting event frame. The technical aspects of football were widely discussed on Facebook ($n = 138$, 38.9%), thus calling on an in-depth knowledge of the sport and its players:

Burkina Faso lost at home more than a decade ago. Only the Elephants [Ivory Coast's football team's nickname], with their stars, are able to inflict such shame on their supporters. Since Drogba [former Ivory Coast player] left, what have you accomplished? (16-10-14; 03:44 PM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/512711.html>);

Think back to 2005, world qualifying 2006 last ticket for the Cameroon–Egypt qualifier, a long-distance duel between Cameroonians and us. 1-nothing was enough for the Cameroonians to qualify knowing that the Egyptians had nothing to lose, but they (Egyptians) played bravely and they beat the Cameroonians, and we Ivorians with our victory in the other match, we also qualified (. . .) (16-11-14; 08:17 PM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/515936.html>).

Political frame. Criticisms of the CAF ($n = 39$, 11%) expressed on Facebook relied not only on epidemic management and sporting event frames presented in the previous sections, but also on a political frame, such as corruption:

In addition, it will be necessary to host this CAN in an unqualified country or to recover one . . . Bravo! consistency! (11-11-14; 04:40 PM; https://www.lemonde.fr/football/article/2014/11/11/la-can-2015-n-aura-pas-lieu-au-maroc_4521901_1616938.html).

Honestly Morocco did well to withdraw from hosting this damn CAN. In Africa nothing is straight. The only place Mr. Hayatou or Mr. Corruption could find to host the CAN was Central Africa! (14-11-14; 10:09 PM; <http://afriquefoot.rfi.fr/20141114-football-can-2015-aura-lieu-guinee-equatoriale-ebola-maroca-qatar>).

Additionally, racial rivalries were more frequently expressed on Facebook ($n = 58$, 16.3%). For example, while criticism of Morocco ($n = 16$, 4.5%) was mainly limited to sport arguments (regarding hosting of the international competition) in the tweets, it was politicized on Facebook, appealing both to economic arguments (protection of tourism by Morocco) and racist ones. This was also witnessed in arguments supporting the CAF ($n = 15$, 4.2%), which highlighted Morocco's racism towards the rest of Africa:

These North Africans who do not consider themselves as Africans can certainly close their borders! But talking about beggars, Ebola, or AIDS, to justify doing so, is a little too easy right? And they still have this superiority complex towards the blacks (. . .) (12-11-14; 00:00 AM; http://malijet.com/actualite_sportive_au_mali/115912-can-2015-1%E2%80%99afrique-suspendue-au-verdict-de-la-caf.html).

These racial rivalries mostly focused on relations between Morocco (and North Africa in general) and Black Africa, also expressing wider tensions, such as those between Whites and Blacks, between the northern and southern countries, and a general criticism of the West. Thus, North Africa's refusal to host the CAN was seen as a racist act against Black Africa:⁴

The problem is that the North Africans in general do not consider themselves to be Africans. (. . .). Morocco is happy to reinforce the stigmatization of the black man (. . .) (12-11-14; 02:22 AM; https://www.leral.net/CAN-2015-Maroc-exclu-le-communique-integral-du-comite-executif-de-la-CAF_a129136.html);

It is not even a problem of funding. Morocco is never comfortable associating with anything Africa since the Arabs invaders push Black African southward. Morocco is NOT a member of African Union! (13-11-14; 02:04 PM; Internet link broken).

In this context, more global tensions emerged:

That's how these Westerners are, always playing at teaching lessons! (24-10-14; 07:07 AM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>);

'Orange Africa Cup of Nations'????? Did I misread where CAF sold our continent to France and to its company Orange [Orange is a French phone company]???? (12-11-14; 09:01 AM; https://www.dakaractu.com/Le-Maroc-n-organisera-pas-la-CAN-2015-et-se-fait-lourdement-sanctionner-_a78296.html)

"The West" seemed to be very much on the mind of some social media users. One Facebook comment referred to "the eternal paternalism of Westerners who judge, judge and categorize" (11-11-14; 03:02 PM; https://www.lemonde.fr/football/article/2014/11/11/la-can-2015-n-aura-pas-lieu-au-maroc_4521901_1616938.html), directly recalling the concept of "Françafrique", as France's relationship with its former African colonies is known (Rieker, 2017). It was also in this context that international football bodies, though not the CAF, were criticized ($n = 6$, 1.7%).

In this sense, the political and colonial interference of these international institutions was highlighted:

It is unacceptable that Platini is allowed to interfere in the affairs of CAF. CAF is not UEFA (. . .). But this interference of Platini does not surprise me at all because it is a very French practice to always want to meddle in everything that does not concern them, especially regarding Africa where the French act like it's conquered territory. (. . .) (24-10-14; 10:29 AM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>).

Finally, Ebola was sometimes a pretext for criticizing governments currently in power ($n = 10$, 2.8%) for their mismanagement of the Ebola crisis, as shown by the following comment:

Once more IBK [Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta] humiliated us in the eyes of the world. We were all delighted at not having closed the borders with Guinea. But thoughtlessness, nepotism, bad

governance and lack of professionalism prevailed. And now the country is infested, giving reason to those who close their borders and to Morocco, which is in a sulk about the CAN (. . .) (19-11-14; 00:00 AM; http://malijet.com/la_societe_malienne_aujourd'hui/la_sante_au_mali/116516-ibk-à-kouremalé-«-ebola-est-une-question-de-défense-nationale-».html).

This criticism was at times very general and without any specific argument—“What’s wrong with Senegal is macky sall faye [president of Senegal]” (15-01-15; 11:34 PM; https://www.dakaractu.com/CAN-2015-92-millions-distribues-aux-Lions-20-millions-pour-le-staff_a82382.html)—with Ebola serving as a pretext for venting about governments:

With all the problems that Mali has experienced whose basis is the IRRESPONSIBILITY AND THEFT OF THE LEADERS, so far no lesson has been learned by the new leaders who are bigger THIEVES AND MORE IRRESPONSIBLE THAN EVER. (. . .) (23-10-14; 00:00 AM; http://malijet.com/actualite_internationale/114447-sommet-de-la-francophonie-à-dakar-«sous-haute-sécurité».html).

This criticism of national governments was occasionally transposed to the whole of the African continent, as seen in the above comment that “In Africa nothing is straight” (14-11-14; 10:09 PM; <http://afriquefoot.rfi.fr/20141114-football-can-2015-aura-lieu-guinee-equatoriale-ebola-maroca-qatar>). In contrast, some social media users highlighted Africa’s ability to look after itself: “(. . .) We, Africans, have stopped Ebola in Lagos, megalopolis of 20 million inhabitants” (24-10-14; 07:53 AM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>). The standpoint regarding Africa’s ability to manage the epidemic was thus ambivalent ($n = 9, 2.5\%$).

Religion frame. Affirmation of faith ($n = 23, 6.5\%$) was another theme that only appeared on Facebook:

Treacherous Africans who don’t believe in God. God can send you something else worse than Ebola (01-08-14; 00:00 AM; http://malijet.com/actualite_sportive_au_mali/108311-can-2015-les-seychelles-%C3%A9limin%C3%A9es-par-le%E2%80%A6-ebola.html).

Skepticism frame. Conspiracy theories were also mentioned ($n = 21, 5.9\%$), typically blaming “Whites” for introducing and spreading the Ebola virus:

If the whites develop a vaccine it is because they are the cause of the ebola disease. They created this evil and its remedy. Our parents and grandparents before us never knew this disease (25-10-14; 11:30 AM; <http://news.abidjan.net/h/513302.html>).

Economic frame. Finally, economics was mobilized as a frame ($n = 19, 5.4\%$), suggesting that the world of contemporary football was being perverted by the free flow of money in the game. The continuation of the CAN by the CAF was seen as a win for “big money,” to the detriment of the health of the populations:

Visibly football is treated as more important than the health risk! The football business will always be the same, indifferent to the people, the environment and concerned only by . . . cash!

(11-11-14; 02:05 PM; http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/football/article/2014/11/11/la-can-2015-n-aura-pas-lieu-au-maroc_4521901_1616938.html).

Discussion

Generally speaking, our results show that, in the context of the cancellation of the 2015 CAN, tweets mostly framed the event as an epidemic management issue, while Facebook comments typically framed it as an epidemic, sporting and political event. This difference in the predominant frames in each platform provides useful insights into the discursive and social particularities of Twitter and Facebook.

CAN as a crossroads event

Our study confirms that the 2015 CAN was an event in which social media users invested meanings, by framing it in different ways. To begin, the CAN served as a melting pot where classic frames in both the epidemic and sporting spheres were rearticulated. Indeed, conspiracy theory is a recurring theme in the analysis of epidemics (Atlani-Duault et al., 2015), as it is in the world of football, e.g. match-fixing related to betting is often mentioned (Hill, 2008). Criticism of profiteering and debates on financial issues have also had a very important place in discourse on football (Andreff, 2015) and epidemics (Atlani-Duault et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2020). Similarly, in regards to the religion frame, epidemics such as Ebola have historically been interpreted using spiritual and religious frames, especially in the Global South (Hewlett and Hewlett, 2008). The relationship between religion and sport is equally evident: sportive competitions are sometimes interpreted by supporters as metaphoric battlegrounds between two religions, which become embodied by teams from specific geographical locations that are associated with different faiths (as seen with Glasgow's Rangers–Celtics conflict: see Huddleston, 2017).

However, the cancellation of the CAN was problematized not only as an epidemic management or sport issue, but also from a political perspective. Sociologically, social media not only allow the expression of epidemic fears when a virus (Ebola) modifies the behavior of football institutions (CAF) and governmental institutions (Morocco), and the expression of football passion: it is also a space where political views can be (re)articulated (see Table 2). Results confirm that the CAN is fertile ground for exploring the complex links between sport and African societies (Eboko, 2013). Indeed, social media comments on the CAN shed light on issues such as othering (North Africa versus Black Africa, North–South and White–Black relations), and allow for the articulation of opinions relating to both national institutions (criticism of or support for governments) and international institutions (relations with CAF and with international institutions such as FIFA).

The concept of frames (Kuypers, 2010) allows for the various interpretations of the cancellation to be conceptualized as strategic, that is, fulfilling goals and promoting interests. This is seen in the rearticulation of pre-existing social and political dynamics (African politics, conspiracy theories, and criticism of profiteering). In this sense, the social media material in our study echoes the above-mentioned theories of reflection,

reproduction, and resistance (Donnelly, 1995) in different measures. Frames investing meaning in the CAN reflected pre-existing political tensions and frustrations, and reproduced these same issues, by (re)circulating them on the Web and promoting them. However, while some comments reflect and reproduce certain negative stereotypes, others show that sport can be a source of solidarity and even of resistance to the stigma the Ebola virus can engender in the community:

Come on Africans, together let's fight the evil that is Ebola, one of so many evils that like gangrene are eating away at our dear continent –recognized as the birthplace of humanity;

By hosting the AFCON in ghana "@newsontv3: How do we do away with stigma against people from countries affected by Ebola?#NewDay.

Rhetorical frame analysis allowed us to explore the variety of ways in which the cancellation of the CAN was framed, amplifying some elements and obscuring others. While our analysis did not explicitly show how the focus on certain themes or understandings led to the marginalization of other topics, it was nevertheless clear that the dominant frames involve a metaphorical folding-in on themselves, with arguments emanating from a risk-based perspective and rearticulating pre-existing fears, frustrations and beliefs (Roy et al., 2020). Indeed, there was an overall predominance of risk-based frames: comments calling for the management of the epidemic and the cancellation of the CAN were matched by those minimizing the risks of the epidemic, argued from an assessment of epidemiological and biomedical risks. Moreover, conspiracy theories, as well as political, religion, sporting event and economic frames all served to express opinions that were already circulating, thus reinforcing or encouraging a certain self-affirmation and self-validation. In highlighting an existing value or belief (Rennick, 2013), these predominant framings of the CAN cancellation overshadowed other frames that promoted newer perspectives based on a more rights- or humanitarian-based understanding (Valente et al., submitted), such as calls for international solidarity and expressions of concern for those living in the Ebola-affected areas.

Facebook versus Twitter?

Our results found that, in the context of the 2015 cancellation of the CAN, Facebook was a virtual space featuring more controversy than Twitter. Indeed, the high number of “factual” tweets showed the less vehement tone of Twitter (compared to Facebook), which was often used as a platform to circulate information from various sources. Our results also indicate that frames had differing importance across social media platforms. First, when tweets expressed a clear opinion, a majority of posts ($n = 430$ or 72.3%) dealt directly with the Ebola virus (epidemic management frame), the proportion on Facebook was less than half ($n = 166$ or 31.9%—see Table 3). It thus appears that Twitter mostly relied on epidemic management framings of the cancellation of the CAN. Although the main frame circulating on Facebook was also that of epidemic management, the sporting event and political frames were more present than on Twitter. Moreover, contributions dealing with the strictly technical aspects of football were much more visible on Facebook

(26.5% versus 6.7% on Twitter), along with political content (29.4% on Facebook versus 9.4% on Twitter). Some themes on Twitter became politicized on Facebook (criticism of Morocco and support for the CAF), while new political themes emerged on Facebook (criticism of governments currently in power; relation to Africa; and criticism of football's international organizations).

The differences in the frames circulating on each platform could have been influenced by the presence of specific institutions on these social media. First, health authorities tend to use Twitter more frequently than Facebook in their communication strategies. During the Ebola epidemic, for example, Twitter was widely included in public and global health communication strategies (Carter, 2014), while Facebook was not. It is thus possible that health authorities had a greater presence on Twitter, where their frames are possibly more frequently read and circulated than on Facebook, and that this presence influenced Twitter's conversational landscape. As for our results relating to the Facebook platform, our data protocol was such that the comments posted on this social media that were analyzed in the context of this study were responses to news articles, which was not the case for the Twitter data. Due to this relation between our analyzed Facebook data and traditional media articles, the framing by authors of comments may have reflected or been significantly influenced by the framing provided in the media articles. In other words, it is possible that Facebook comments reproduced that media framing instead of contributing something new. As such, conclusions about these comments cannot be exclusively related to Facebook's influence as a platform but could be associated with the nature of the collected data, which consisted of comments responding to, and thus connected to, traditional media articles; it is possible that the issue was not exclusively one of Twitter versus Facebook, but also one of health authorities (more prevalent on Twitter) versus traditional media (associated with our collected Facebook comments).

Finally, it is important to note that Facebook is much better established than Twitter in African countries (Kemp, 2017), which may explain why Facebook manifested as the more polemic and political platform in our research.

Limitations

Creating data corpora from social media platforms has many limitations. First, we cannot know if the analyzed comments are representative of the true opinions of social media users. Indeed, impulsive (i.e. not carefully considered) publication of posts (Turel and Qahri-Saremi, 2018), fake profiles, and adoption of a persona differing from one's authentic self are phenomena well-known to be present on social media. In the future, it might be useful to conduct interviews with social media users in order to better understand the level of concordance between frames circulating online and their personal opinions. Nevertheless, many authors have shown that there is a continuum between people's online personae and their offline selves, with social media serving as vectors for the expression of an authentic self (Chester and Bretherton, 2007; Hongladarom, 2011). Others postulate that the presentation of the self online is a method of construction of one's identity, perceived as the product of everyday practices including social media posts (Cardon, 2009; Georges, 2009; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Secondly, it is impossible to know the influence of social media posts on those who read them, or more broadly on the digital and social

worlds. Finally, social media posts cannot be completely or universally accessed. Moderators filter and remove comments and tweets that do not respect the rules of the given platform (for example, outrageous or abusive posts are usually reported and removed). In other words, there is a certain degree of censorship of social media data.

Our research also faced other limitations, relating to the nature of the extracted data. To begin, we did not collect the geolocation of the comments. The impossibility of identifying the socioeconomic and geographic composition of our sample prevented comparison of frame use between sociodemographic groups. Additionally, the Facebook comments collected were all responding to a specific article. This was justified by the public nature of those comments, which are accessible by all. Nevertheless, this limited our data corpus because private posts on users' profiles, group conversations and comments, and public pages were not considered. Thirdly, the keyword-based data extraction we used was another possible limitation. For example, we only collected comments containing the keywords "CAN" and "Ebola", while others ("AFCON", "African Cup of Nations") could have also been relevant. However, let us note that our objective was not to attain an exhaustive corpus by considering all possible keywords or by capturing all occurrences; rather, we aimed to construct a corpus that was relevant and large enough to permit analysis of its signifying content. Moreover, our preliminary study to guide choice of keywords indicated that the term CAN was the most widely-used to refer to the event in question. It would nevertheless be interesting to carry out a comparative analysis of different data corpora, using differing keyword extractions to explore variations in conversations depending on the keyword used.

Finally, frame analysis was developed in research that studied printed texts and speeches. Our research transposed "classic" frame analysis methodology to a new corpus, that of social media. Our data collection thus focused on word content, without consideration for social media-specific modalities (likes, retweets, and shares). It should be noted that many other studies on social media have applied this method to better understand the frames as communicated in news feeds, tweets, visuals and videos (Koivisto and Mattila, 2020; Mörner and Olausson, 2017; Rennick, 2013). Future studies might usefully adapt frame analysis methodology more specifically to social media data, for example, by analyzing the number of likes, shares and retweets, and re-conceptualizing their role by considering the quantitative importance, popularity and re-circulation of frames.

Conclusion

This study investigated the main frames mobilized on Twitter and Facebook to invest meaning in the Moroccan cancellation of the CAN due to Ebola fears. Our results indicate that the meaning invested in the CAN goes beyond the fields of sport and health: it is also a political issue, understood by social media users in a manner that resonated with pre-existing beliefs, frustrations and politics. Indeed, this event provided supplementary echoes of current fears about epidemics' and football's traditional passions and reinforced the polemic force of online discussions. Subsequently, CAN was strategically used online to rearticulate opinions and debates on topics such as inter-African politics, racial discrimination, conspiracy theories and profiteering.

In the context of this study, online reactions to the cancellation of the CAN were social-media specific. In our data, the epidemic management frame occupied a very

important place on Twitter while the political and sporting event frames were much more frequent on Facebook. Our study suggests that it is sociologically revealing (and therefore valuable) to analyze each major social medium individually rather than treating “social media” as a homogenous whole and to consider how different institutional influences in each of those platforms might affect the circulating frames. However, our study was exploratory and qualitative; more in-depth quantitative studies should be carried out to explore the potentially different sociological roles of social media platforms.

Our study nonetheless confirms the value of analyzing data from different social media in order to better understand the social dynamics of major sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games. It shows that the analysis of tweets and Facebook comments (and potentially other social media platforms such as Instagram) allow researchers to access ever more national and international data, at a lower cost.

Our research also suggests that future studies of events at the crossroads of the health and sport worlds could lead to useful findings from other fields. These enormously popular events could serve as real-life laboratories for sociologists, yielding valuable information on a variety of topics. Future studies could also potentially benefit from the study of social media conversations surrounding minor sporting competitions (e.g. local leagues, charity competitions, and youth activities) to analyze socio-political processes.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. This article takes place in a broader international research “Ebola: rumors of blame, disputes and controversies. Perspectives from the online world”, for which ethics approbation was received by the research institute French National Institute of Health and Medical Research [INSERM] in France, as well as the ethics review board of the University of Ottawa.

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Notes

1. The terms CAN and AFCON are synonyms for the Africa Cup of Nations. The competition takes place every two years and brings together the best African teams. It is organized by the Confederation of African Football.

2. The political rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has been longstanding. The Sand War in 1963 was the first marked event in this confrontation. Tensions have persisted between these two countries, namely with the war in the Occidental Sahara, where Algeria endorsed the Polisario separatist movement fighting for the independence of the Western Sahara. However, such tensions seem to have recently been appeased, as seen with Morocco's 2017 return to the African Union after more than 30 years of absence in protest against the attribution of seats to the Polisario Front.
3. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Club World Cup took place in Morocco in December 2014. The contradiction noted on social media is not a serious one because it was important for Morocco to keep good links with FIFA in the context of Morocco's multi-year effort to host the largest world football competition, the FIFA World Cup.
4. It is interesting that this online mention of racism by Moroccans towards other African countries did not emerge during the vote for hosting the World Cup 2026, in which a large majority of African countries (including Algeria) supported Morocco in its quest to organize this mega event (Lequipe, 2018).

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