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America's World Cup Cities in Conversation: A Snapshot Before Kickoff ^[1]

This is the second in a series of blogs by [Professor Jay Wang](#), Director of the Master of Public Diplomacy Program at USC Annenberg, focusing on how the eleven U.S. host cities for the FIFA World Cup are represented and discussed across digital and social media environments during the FIFA tournament. Read [Part One](#).

In the month leading up to kickoff of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, conversations across news outlets, social media platforms, and online forums regarding the eleven U.S. host cities revealed several recurring themes as well as a number of city-specific stories. These discussions offer an early snapshot of the narratives taking shape around the host cities as they prepare to welcome a global audience. Such narratives often evolve once competition begins, making it worthwhile to examine the opportunities and challenges that may influence perceptions of the host cities during the tournament.

The most widely discussed issue across the host cities has been uncertainty surrounding hotel demand. Reports of weaker-than-expected bookings have fueled debate about the tournament's projected economic impact. Security has been another recurring theme, drawing attention to transportation systems, crowd management, and public safety. Particular attention has also been given to Iran's participation in the tournament and the logistical arrangements amidst ongoing international tensions, highlighting the enduring interplay of sport and geopolitics.

Alongside these concerns, a more celebratory narrative has centered on the cultural and entertainment dimensions of the World Cup. Discussions have highlighted fan festivals, public viewing events, concerts, and community celebrations that extend well beyond the matches themselves. The introduction of a halftime show at the final, featuring globally recognized musical artists, is a clear indication of how the tournament is being positioned as a fusion of sport, entertainment, and popular culture. These conversations reflect a broader trend in contemporary mega-events, where competition on the field increasingly serves as a vehicle for a wider cultural experience designed to engage diverse audiences and attract global attention.

Beyond these common themes, U.S. host cities have generated distinctive narratives that reflect their local identities and priorities. In Dallas, attention has centered on controversy surrounding the decision to paint over the "Ocean Life" mural, a downtown civic landmark, to make way for World Cup artwork. The dispute has sparked broader conversations about the relationship between mega-events and local cultural heritage.

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values, and identities."

Los Angeles has become a focal point for discussions about labor rights and immigration enforcement. Workers at SoFi Stadium voted to authorize a strike, demanding better wages and protections against potential ICE operations during the tournament.

Seattle's World Cup narrative has frequently intersected with ongoing discussions about homelessness, public services, and urban governance. Controversy surrounding the installation of high-cost public toilets, for instance, illustrates how preparations for a global event can draw renewed attention to longstanding challenges and local politics.

Elsewhere, Atlanta has generated discussion around a different aspect of host-city readiness. Some restaurants plan to implement automatic gratuity policies during the anticipated influx of international visitors, many of whom come from cultures where tipping is not customary. The move has sparked debate about cultural expectations as well as the appropriateness of mandatory tipping in the service industry.

In Miami, much of the attention has focused on Lionel Messi and concerns about his fitness heading into the tournament after he left the pitch during Inter Miami's last match. The discussion underscores the city's close association with global soccer celebrity culture. At the same time, the denial of entry to a Somali World Cup referee at Miami International Airport has fueled debate over immigration and visa policies.

Kansas City, by contrast, has attracted largely positive attention as an emerging soccer destination. With several national teams selecting the city as their base camp, Kansas City has increasingly been portrayed as an unexpected World Cup hub and a beneficiary of newfound global visibility.

Several cities have also attracted attention through initiatives aimed at expanding participation and inclusion, such as New York City's affordable-ticket lottery and "Soccer Streets" program, both designed to broaden access to the tournament and create opportunities for community engagement. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the establishment of Pride Houses for LGBTQ+ fans has become a prominent feature of pre-tournament discussions, reinforcing inclusion as part of the region's World Cup identity.

Viewed collectively, these conversations demonstrate that the World Cup is already functioning as a global stage for urban storytelling. Rather than projecting a single image of America, the lead-up narratives reveal a mosaic of cities, each presenting its own mix of opportunities, challenges, values, and identities. Many of these conversations are not fundamentally about soccer, but about the local issues, aspirations, and debates that the tournament has brought into sharper public view. Whether these city-level narratives ultimately produce a more textured portrayal and understanding of the United States among international audiences remains an open question as the tournament unfolds.

Note:

The analysis in this series draws on data collected through Brandwatch, a digital media monitoring and social listening platform, using a tailored set of search terms designed to capture conversations related to each host city and the World Cup. The objective is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of all online discussions, but rather to offer a snapshot of prominent narratives, recurring topics, and notable points of attention during the period examined.
