

Tourism in Qatar between Crises and Opportunities: From the Blockade through the FIFA World Cup (2017-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Qatar's tourism sector has faced both shocks and opportunities since 2017, driven by the 2017 blockade on Qatar, the COVID-19 pandemic, the FIFA World Cup 2022, and, most recently, the Iranian and Israeli strikes. The paper evaluates policy and scholarly literature from 2017 to 2025 to identify research trends and governance strategies for resilience and crisis management in Qatar's tourism sector. Content analysis was conducted across multiple academic databases and government reports to triangulate findings. The results show that since 2017, tourism diversification and sustainability have improved, with mega events acting as key drivers and precursors to Qatar's broader tourism objectives. The results typically underscore the importance of Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Third Qatar National Development Strategy (2024-2030) in improving sports performance and promoting cultural tourism, thereby enhancing the visitor experience. The subsequent policy implications suggest governance decisions focused on market diversification and Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE), alongside improvements in sustainability and digitalization. The paper establishes the future agenda for investigations from a longitudinal perspective, aiming to understand crisis management and resilience, as well as the pathways towards decarbonization and heritage management amidst rapid urbanization.

Keywords: Qatar Tourism, Crisis Management, Tourism, FIFA World Cup 2022, Content Analysis, Diversification, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Qatar's tourism sector, a key component of its economic diversification beyond oil and gas (Musinguzi, 2016), has shown remarkable resilience amid significant challenges. The period from 2017 to 2025 saw the country navigate the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) diplomatic blockade and the global COVID-19 pandemic, both of which severely restricted

regional and international travel. Despite these obstacles, the Qatari government swiftly adapted its policies and strategies, gradually reopening to international visitors. The subsequent hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022 stands as a testament to this resilience.

The successful hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022 was a significant milestone for Qatar's tourism sector, enhancing the country's global profile and soft power. This success not only demonstrated the maturity of Qatar's governance but also integrated the tourism approach into the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 (Oxford Business Group, 2022). The tourism sector is aligned with the Third Qatar National Development Strategy (2024–2030), reflecting national priorities for diversification, sustainability, and cultural development. , aiming to enhance its contribution to the national GDP and optimize visitor experiences through technology and improved service quality (NPC, 2024).

Musinguzi's (2016) review of Qatar's tourism literature identified specific thematic concentrations in sports tourism, followed by tourism management and heritage. The methodological weakness was identified as limitations in validity, excessive reliance on secondary data, and reduced engagement with high-impact journals. However, subsequent times have led to policy reforms that have impacted the research landscape. There is an increasing demand for diversification in contemporary studies because non-GCC markets are impacting inbound flows, serving as substitutes, and because of the pandemic's collapse, followed by recovery and the subsequent World Cup legacy. Hence, there has been a notable shift in Qatar's digital transformation within its tourism ecosystem, accompanied by significant reforms to its visa liberalization policies to enhance the visitor experience and open the country to a broader range of international markets.

This study updates and extends Musinguzi's (2016) content analysis to overcome the research gap by including peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and policy papers from 2017 to 2025. The paper also identifies new thematic trends in Qatar's tourism research, like sustainability, digital transformation, heritage management, sports legacy, and crisis recovery. The paper also analyses methodological progress and academic collaboration since 2016.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various emerging themes in tourism in Qatar have appeared since 2017, and GCC insights on these present a highly complex picture compared to the pre-2016 era.

Blockade 2017

As per Gengler (2020), the blockade imposed on Qatar in June 2017 established a significant event in the international relations across the GCC and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Earlier, the GCC served as a vehicle for strategic cooperation, regional political and economic harmony among the GCC countries and the MENA region. However, the embargo negatively affected social, economic, and political relations within Qatar. The embargo was imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt, following the suspension of diplomatic and economic ties with Doha. The blockading states officially justified the 2017 blockade of Qatar as a response to perceived divergences in Doha's foreign policy and regional alliances. The condition of lifting the blockade included the severance of Qatar's political ties with Iran and Hamas. However, Qatar stated that the allegations were baseless and illegitimate while refusing to meet the demands of the besieging countries (Albasoos et al., 2021). The 2017 blockade on Qatar was announced unexpectedly overnight, suspending the major sea and air trade routes for the country, along with its land borders with Saudi Arabia. This prompted Qatar to identify alternate trade partners and routes for importing food and continuing trade.

The blockade had a significant impact on aggregate imports in the first quarter of 2017, decreasing from QAR 28 billion to QAR 24.5 billion, and subsequently to QAR 23.6 billion in the second quarter. However, Qatar displayed resilience, with total imports increasing to QAR 32.6 billion by the end of 2017 (Umar & Ghurab, 2023; Albasoos et al., 2021). However, the blockade disrupted visitor flows from GCC countries to Qatar, as International connectivity was blocked, impacting sectoral revenue. However, Qatar focused on establishing a transnational economic plan to achieve self-sufficiency and ensure the continuity of food production and medical services. According to Al-Mal and Saad (2021), Qatar also demonstrated resilience in gaining the confidence of the global shipping industry, as evidenced by the number of cruise tourists visiting Doha Port in 2017. The quest to meet the demands of the maritime tourism industry led to a significant transformation at Doha Port, with reconstruction initiated in 2018 to realign the channel. The blockade also provided Qatar with a substantial opportunity to pursue visa liberalization and destination marketing to tap into the tourism sector's potential. The initiatives for tourism market diversification targeted visitors from European and Asian markets, not just the GCC markets.

Crisis Management

The 2017 blockade on Qatar required timely crisis management by authorities to mitigate negative impacts and prompted increased regional tourism investments, boosting resilience. Buigut and Kapar (2020) note that effective crisis management benefited Qatar despite the harm. The crisis improved perceptions of His Highness Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's leadership, portraying him as inspirational. Proper planning and resilience improved Qatar's imports and exports. Despite a Ramadan boycott causing shortages in supermarkets, Qatar sourced imports from Oman, Iran, and Turkey (Antoniades et al., 2022). The government's crisis strategy led to exports rising to USD 84.29 billion. Although tourism was initially affected, security was later assured, increasing cruise ship arrivals in late 2017.

As per Umar and Ghurab (2023), stakeholder collaboration and inclusive policy were among the strategies for improving resilience during the crisis and for focusing on the tourism sector through adaptations. In Qatar, a proactive tourism crisis management initiative during and after the blockade involved safety protocols and

communication strategies. The government partnered with industry operators to boost reliability and tourist confidence despite international volatility.

Covid-19

While the blockade tested Qatar's economic resilience at the regional level, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a far broader global challenge to Qatar's tourism sector. As per Yap et al. (2023), Inbound tourism in the country was negatively impacted, with a more than 70% decline in 2020, in alignment with global trends. However, the government's initiative to revitalize and diversify the tourism sector, along with associated investments in hospitality infrastructure, reduces the impact of the decline. Hence, the tourism sector recovered rapidly through rapid decision-making as a health intervention and a sectoral incentive. Compared with global standards, Doha recorded one of the highest room occupancy rates and the lowest decline in revenue per room among other global cities (Tunali, 2022). Qatar also took health and safety measures led by Qatar Tourism, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Public Health. This was through an application called EHTERAZ. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Qatar launched one of the region's most advanced digital governance tools — the EHTERAZ mobile app. Introduced in April 2020 by the Ministry of Interior, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health and the Communications Regulatory Authority, the app aimed to improve public health monitoring. The name EHTERAZ, meaning "precaution," reflected Qatar's proactive use of technology in national health governance. The government made the app mandatory through a ministerial decree, tying compliance to movement permits and access to public facilities (Qatar Tribune, 2020). Each user received a colour code — green for healthy, red for infected, yellow for quarantined, and grey for pending cases — enabling real-time risk assessment and control over suspects' mobility. Besides its public health role, EHTERAZ helped rebuild confidence in Qatar's tourism and hospitality sectors by supporting safe reopening protocols for visitors. Despite some early concerns about data privacy, the system was later adjusted to comply with Qatar's Data Protection Law No. 13 of 2016, thereby establishing EHTERAZ as a regional example of digital resilience and coordinated crisis management.

Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability is the cornerstone of Qatar's tourism strategy and the Third National Development Strategy (2024-2030), as it focuses on Sustainable economic development. Within the QNV 2030, significant focus is on establishing an equilibrium among social and environmental goals, reflected in policy design and execution. Al-Hammadi (2022) highlights the sustainable tourism and development initiative in Qatar, aligned with Qatari identity and heritage. The author has established sustainable tourism development in the country by adaptively converting traditional houses into museums, such as the Radwani House Museum and the Company House Museum. Such initiatives not only preserve the country's cultural assets but also promote eco-friendliness and the overall sustainability agenda. Qatar received more than 2.93 million tourists in 2015, and GCC countries accounted for more than 44% of those tourists (Stephenson & Al-Hamarneh, 2017). However, after the blockade, market diversification initiatives intend to attract more tourists from other markets.

The scale of investment for market diversification in tourism and attracting International visitors included investment over USD 200 billion for World Cup preparations and hosting other mega sports events. Mustapha and Abdelhalim (2024) argued that Qatar's sports investment for the FIFA World Cup 2022 was intended to achieve sustainable development outcomes through stadium recycling and reuse, along with a 40% reduction in water and energy use. The initiative was part of Qatar's national vision to diversify its economy. However, Mahboob and Faisal (2025) argue that Qatar's unique cultural identity was also preserved through sustainability initiatives, including heritage tourism aimed at attracting global audiences. Marketing efforts through digital campaigns and exhibitions increased fan engagement during the World Cup, prompting them to visit and explore museums and shaping their impression of the country.

Government initiatives in Qatar include efforts to preserve traditional architectural heritage to foster a positive socio-cultural impact. As per Weber (2017), the purpose is to enhance understanding of the legacy of the ancestors of the Qatari people and deepen knowledge of Qatari traditions and heritage. Architectural Heritage as a tool of Sustainable tourism Development in the country focuses on improving the visitor experience and journey by optimizing the understanding of local cultural heritage and encouraging people to maintain connections with their past despite recent transformations (Scharfenort, 2017).

Mega Events and Sports Tourism

Sports tourism, including the mega-event legacy in Qatar—the run-up and execution of the FIFA World Cup 2022—has various implications for social and economic aspects. Ishac (2024) reported positive results from a survey on Qatar's perception as a destination for sports tourism, given its hosting of major tournaments and events. Crisis and resilience are also emerging themes in Qatar's tourism sector. The 2017 blockade in the country between 2017 and 2021 was a critical factor, as it negatively impacted the country's tourism sector, along with the pandemic.

The situation not only prompted the government to reduce visa restrictions but also led the country to become a significant visa-open economy in the Middle East (Manurung & Ramadhan, 2025).

Digital Tourism and Innovation

Digital tourism initiatives, such as the Visit Qatar campaign, signal the country's commitment to modernizing tourism and reaching global audiences through social media, mobile apps, and AI personalization (Al-Kuwari, 2024). The government supports digital adoption in hospitality and has pushed policy reforms, notably through NDS3 (2024-2030), to strengthen governance and promotion further, aiming to reach 6 million visitors by 2030 (Hajjaj et al., 2024). As per Elidrisy (2024), digital technology, including AI-based trip planners and innovative mobility platforms, is integrated across the tourism industry in Qatar. The competitiveness of the contemporary tourism industry depends on digital technology adoption, and, hence, digital cultural experiences are prioritized in Qatar, with a focus on optimizing the visitor experience and improving operational efficiency (Nabila, 2023). The overall alignment is also established with the QNV2030 for preserving national cultural heritage through tourism while developing smart tourism hubs, such as Msheireb Downtown Doha, as a sustainable downtown regeneration project.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses content analysis, aligning with Musinguzi (2016), to include policy and industry sources, along with their review articles, from 2017 to 2022. Academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, ProQuest, and Qscience were used to identify additional indexed sources. Keywords were used in combinations, including Qatar tourism, 2017 blockade on Qatar, FIFA World Cup 2022, COVID-19 pandemic, economic diversification, sustainability, digital tourism, governance, and market diversification. Source selection was done based on the availability of methodological information. Three main criteria—themes, methods, and authorship—were used to code the documents. Themes were identified, like sports legacy and mega events, crisis management and recovery, digital transformation, sustainability and heritage tourism, governance, and diversification. The methods included identifying the data type used, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The analytical techniques were also considered.

The authorship included an assessment of the source's Qatar or International affiliations. Policy sources were also considered, such as reports on Qatar tourism and the Qatar Chamber's Covid-19 assessment. The methods focused on improving the contextual validation of the findings and triangulating the dynamics of the sector. Musinguzi's categories served as the reference point for the coding scheme to ensure comparability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the thematic trends, methodological patterns, and authorship of the selected sources.

Thematic Trends

Sports legacy and mega events were the most significant themes, as evidenced by the analysis of tourist arrivals and expenditure. The flow of visitors and spillover was evident across the GCC in the theme. An IMF estimate indicates that tourism expenditure and broadcasting revenue accounted for 1% of Qatar's GDP in 2022 (Bibolov et al., 2024). This was similar to the global levels, as some studies also identified the influence on destination identity building through event hosting.

Crisis management and recovery were also identified as essential themes, given Qatar's experience with the 2017 blockade on Qatar. Tourist arrivals were negatively affected by this, despite increases from non-GCC nations, requiring market diversification from 2017 to 2019. However, GCC ties normalized after 2021, leading to a higher influx of visitors from GCC countries and Saudi Arabia. However, COVID-19 studies established a rapid decline in digital inflow during 2020 and 2021. Despite this, the Doha hotel market remained resilient (Kerbache & Yadikar, 2020).

Digital transformation was also evident in the identified sources, as the Visit Qatar campaign gained prominence. The digitalization of tourism enterprises and the personalization of the visitor experience were also consistent with QNV's digital agenda (MCIT, 2025).

Sustainability and cultural heritage were also identified as important themes, as decarbonization efforts were evident in Qatar (QM, 2024). Adaptive transformations of houses into museums are consistent with the Qatari heritage and cultural values while promoting tourism in the country and diversifying visitor interests.

Governance and diversification are highly relevant, with a focus on expanding cruise services and facilitating visas in Qatar. The cruise segment of tourism continued to proliferate in 2019, with 98% growth and more than

127,500 visitors. The largest segment of arrivals by cruise came from Germany, with 49,310 visitors (Qatar Tourism, 2019).

The trends indicate a focus on Sustainable tourism, maintaining a relationship with Qatar's architectural and cultural heritage while addressing ongoing transformations, including the development and use of digital technologies (Yaqot et al., 2024). Resilience and crisis management by the authorities, along with diversification in the tourism market, were instrumental in recovering from the 2017 blockade and quickly recovering from the pandemic. The ideology of dedicated infrastructure and hospitality facility development was instrumental in supporting recovery after the pandemic and in positioning Qatar as a favourable International tourism destination with mega events, including the World Cup (Carvache-Franco et al., 2024).

Methodological Patterns

Musinguzi (2016) focused heavily on qualitative studies, whereas this paper shows a greater inclination towards mixed-methods and quantitative analyses for greater validity. The methodological focus included triangulating the data and assessing legacy, with an explicit focus on the practices of tourism development in Qatar after 2017. Despite underreporting in some outputs, the use of robust inference methods and variables in peer-reviewed journals increases the validity of the results. The international collaboration is evident in policy- and legacy-focused studies identified as co-authored with Qatar-based scholars.

Authorship

Authorship in the identified sources indicated international contributions, in addition to Qatar-based authors, for evaluating the legacy of the FIFA World Cup 2022. The service extension in the country to manage visitor inflows, the overall use of digital technology for marketing and analytics, and a sustainability initiative were also noted.

Alignment with Policy Frameworks

Policy and performance aspects were considered as Qatar tourism required significant governance reforms, including digital marketing and visa liberalization. This included the use of personalization and digital technology, along with cruise development, to increase tourist arrivals after the 2022 World Cup.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Policy Implications

Policy implications include consolidating tourism's legacy into sustainable demand by leveraging the popularity gained from hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022. The need to improve tourism itinerary packages and achieve NDS3 targets was also included.

Initiatives taken to improve crisis resilience through diversification of the economy across secondary markets and cruise travel. Implications also include strengthening contingency planning, enhancing digital capabilities for personalization and dynamic planning, and improving service delivery. Sustainability must be embraced for conservation and green mobility, driving better carbon reporting and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

Tourism research and the sector's performance in Qatar from 2017 to 2022 reflect strategic decision-making and benefit from the mega event of the FIFA World Cup 2022 in improving destination attractiveness. The research transcends the pre-2016 focus on sports and heritage tourism to include resilience and crisis management in the country amid the 2017 blockade and pandemic. The findings are based on Qatar's strategic evolution, as outlined in the QNV 2030 and the Third Qatar National Development Strategy (2024-2030), and a methodological approach. Hosting mega sports events not only enhanced Qatar's attractiveness as a tourism destination but also facilitated the development of its infrastructure and the delivery of high-quality services.

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