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FIFA'S HYDRATION BREAK POLICY, BROADCAST COMMERCIALISATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY DEBATES IN THE 2026 FIFA WORLD CUP

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ABSTRACT: This study, titled *FIFA's Hydration Break Policy, Broadcast Commercialization, and Sustainability Debates in the 2026 FIFA World Cup*, investigated audience perceptions of FIFA's mandatory hydration-break policy within the intersecting contexts of player welfare, media commercialization, and the sustainability of contemporary sports broadcasting. The study was anchored on the Political Economy of Communication framework and complemented by Smythe's Audience Commodity thesis. Adopting a qualitative descriptive design, the research utilised thematic content analysis of a viral Facebook discussion posted by *Innonaija* under the caption "*FIFA Water Break Controversy*." From a total of 534 comments, 287 visible comments (53.7%) retained by Facebook's moderation system constituted the analytical corpus. Through inductive coding procedures, comments were categorised into six dominant themes: player welfare, tactical implications, commercialization, broadcast economics, sustainability, and resistance to innovation. Findings revealed a threefold pattern. First, the majority of participants perceived the policy as a legitimate welfare intervention designed to mitigate dehydration, fatigue, heat stress, and injury risks under extreme tournament conditions. Second, respondents strongly associated the breaks with the creation of additional advertising inventory, sponsorship visibility, and revenue optimization opportunities, thereby reinforcing the commodification of audience attention. Third, public opinion remained sharply divided between supporters who viewed the policy as a necessary innovation and critics who considered it an intrusion into football's traditional rhythm and identity. The study concludes that FIFA's hydration-break policy exists at the intersection of welfare (W), commercialization (C), and sustainability (S), forming a dynamic $W \leftrightarrow C \leftrightarrow S$ relationship that increasingly characterises global sports media. It recommends enhanced transparency by FIFA, fan-centred broadcast advertising strategies, and periodic stakeholder reviews to balance player protection, commercial viability, and the cultural integrity of football.

KEYWORDS: Audience Commodity, Broadcast Commercialization, FIFA World Cup 2026, Hydration Break Policy, Media Sustainability, Player Welfare, Political Economy.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between global sport and media economics has undergone profound transformation since the commercialization of international sporting competitions in the late twentieth century. What began as a relatively straightforward arrangement in which broadcasters paid for the rights to transmit sporting events has evolved into a complex political economy involving governing bodies, multinational sponsors, digital platforms,

advertising agencies, streaming services, and global audiences. The modern sports industry no longer derives its value solely from athletic competition but from its ability to generate attention, audience engagement, and commercial opportunities across multiple media platforms. Within this framework, football occupies a unique position as the world's most watched sport, with the FIFA World Cup serving as one of the largest media spectacles in

contemporary society. Consequently, policy decisions taken by FIFA are rarely interpreted merely as sporting interventions; rather, they are often scrutinised through the lenses of economics, governance, commercialization, and public interest (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Rowe, 2014).

Historically, FIFA has justified many regulatory innovations as measures intended to improve the quality, fairness, and sustainability of football competitions. Over the decades, changes such as goal line technology, Video Assistant Referee systems, expanded substitutions, and revised scheduling arrangements have been presented as mechanisms for enhancing the integrity and welfare dimensions of the game. At the same time, critics have frequently argued that such innovations often produce secondary economic benefits for broadcasters and commercial partners (Giulianotti, 2015). This tension reflects a broader debate within the political economy of sport concerning whether governing institutions primarily serve the interests of athletes and fans or those of corporate stakeholders whose investments sustain global sporting events. As football becomes increasingly integrated into transnational media markets, every modification to the structure of the game attracts questions about the balance between sporting necessity and commercial opportunity.

2026 FIFA World Cup represents a significant milestone in the historical evolution of global football governance. Hosted jointly by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the tournament is the largest in FIFA history, featuring an expanded format of forty eight teams and one hundred and four matches. Alongside concerns relating to tournament logistics, travel schedules, and competition management, increasing attention has been directed toward player welfare, particularly in the context of rising global temperatures and the physiological demands of elite football. In response to these concerns, FIFA introduced mandatory three minute hydration breaks in every match of the tournament, to be taken in the twenty second and sixty seventh minutes of play. Unlike previous cooling break protocols, which were activated only under extreme weather conditions, the 2026 policy requires the breaks to be observed in all matches regardless of temperature, weather conditions, venue characteristics, or the presence of climate controlled stadium infrastructure.

Announcing the policy, FIFA World Cup 2026 Chief Tournament Officer, Manolo Zubiria, stated that "for every game, no matter where the games are played, no matter if there's a roof, temperature wise, there will be a three-minute hydration break," emphasizing that the measure was designed to ensure "equal conditions for all teams, in all matches" (FIFA, 2025). Similarly, FIFA described the initiative as part of its broader commitment to player welfare, drawing on lessons from previous tournaments and climate related health considerations (FIFA, 2025). Defending the policy amid growing criticism, FIFA President Gianni Infantino maintained that the breaks were motivated principally by sporting and welfare concerns rather than commercial interests, arguing that "the main reason is the heat" and that the governing body sought to ensure that "all teams, in every match, are playing under the same conditions" (FIFA, 2026). Infantino further rejected suggestions that the policy was revenue driven, insisting that FIFA gains "absolutely nothing" financially from the breaks and describing the initiative as "purely a sporting matter" (FIFA, 2026). These explanations position the hydration break policy as a welfare centred intervention, although the measure has simultaneously generated extensive debate regarding its commercial and media economic implications.

Notwithstanding, critics argued that football has historically distinguished itself from many other sports through its continuous forty five minute halves, and that the introduction of regular interruptions fundamentally alters the rhythm and flow of the game. Some coaches supported the breaks under extreme weather conditions but opposed their universal application, contending that sporting regulations should respond to actual environmental realities rather than hypothetical risks. These debates illustrate the enduring struggle between standardised governance and contextual decision making within global sports administration.

The controversy deepened when reports emerged that FIFA had authorised broadcasters to air commercial advertisements during the hydration breaks. Industry reports indicated that television networks would be permitted to temporarily leave the match feed and insert advertising content during portions of the three-minute stoppage, thereby

creating new advertising inventory within football's traditionally uninterrupted halves (Khan, 2026). Analysts estimated that these additional commercial windows could generate an unexpected \$250 million to \$600 million in windfall revenue for single networks like Fox Sports alone (Sports Business Journal, 2026). Specifically, a 30-second commercial spot during the initial group stages of the tournament commands between \$200,000 and \$750,000 depending entirely on the match participants (Sports Business Journal, 2026). As the matches grow more intense with subsequent tournament rounds, these advertisement rates escalate drastically. By the time the competition transitions into the high-stakes knockout stages, the commercial fees spike rapidly, with premium advertising slots for the World Cup final projected to potentially eclipse the \$7 million price tag typically commanded by the NFL's Super Bowl (Hardy, 2026). Such developments intensified suspicions among critics who argued that the hydration breaks were not merely welfare interventions but also mechanisms for expanding the commercial value of broadcast rights. Within the political economy tradition, this development raises important questions regarding the commodification of sporting time, the monetization of audience attention, and the increasing influence of commercial imperatives on the governance of global football (Sports Business Journal, 2026).

Statement of the Problem

The introduction of mandatory hydration breaks during the 2026 FIFA World Cup has sparked global debate. While FIFA frames the policy as a player welfare measure against heat risks, critics question its strict enforcement in air-conditioned or rainy venues. Suspicion intensified when reports revealed these breaks create lucrative mid-match ad inventory for broadcasters, pitting athlete health narratives against media commercialization and profit. Despite heated public discourse on social media, there is a paucity of scholarly research analysing how FIFA's welfare rhetoric intersects with broadcast economics. Therefore, this study interrogates the relationship between FIFA's hydration policy, media commercialization, and sustainability debates by analyzing institutional narratives alongside social media reactions through a sports political economy framework

Aim and objective of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine FIFA's hydration break policy in the 2026 FIFA World Cup within the context of broadcast commercialisation and sustainability debates. The objectives were:

1. examine FIFA's official rationale for the introduction of mandatory hydration breaks during the 2026 FIFA World Cup;
2. investigate the commercial implications of hydration breaks for broadcasters and the media economy of the FIFA World Cup; and
3. analyse social media discourses surrounding FIFA's hydration break policy with particular reference to debates on player welfare, commercialisation, and sustainability.

Research Questions

1. What rationale does FIFA provide for the introduction of mandatory hydration breaks during the 2026 FIFA World Cup?
2. What are the commercial implications of the hydration break policy for broadcasters and the media economy of the World Cup?
3. How do social media users interpret and debate FIFA's hydration break policy in relation to player welfare, commercialisation, and sustainability?

Literature Review

FIFA's Hydration Break Policy

The institutional enforcement of mandatory cooling periods has transitioned from a localized medical intervention to a standardized tournament regulation, igniting intense academic debate surrounding sports governance and player safety. FIFA's official rhetoric strongly defends the blanket application of three-minute stoppages in the 22nd and 67th minutes of all 104 matches as a non-negotiable player welfare initiative to combat North American summer heat (Infantino, 2026). However, critics argue that a standardized policy fails to account for structural or environmental nuances. For instance, Bielsa (2026) contends that implementing mandatory pauses inside climate-controlled, air-conditioned domes or during matches played under active rainfall undercuts the scientific validity of the heat-safety rationale.

This tension highlights a deeper conflict within contemporary sports science and governance. While sports medicine advocates emphasize that extreme heat mandates proactive hydration to prevent heat illness (Foster & Casa, 2024), sociologists argue

that the rigid, universal application of these rules points to hidden structural motivations. Rather than relying on live wet-bulb globe temperature (WBGT) readings to determine actual localized risk, the administrative decision to enforce synchronized breaks across highly varied microclimates suggests that regulatory frameworks are being used to manipulate the natural, continuous flow of association football (Hardy, 2026; Khan, 2026). Consequently, what is publicly packaged as progressive corporate social responsibility and climate adaptation is increasingly scrutinized by sports purists as an artificial disruption of the game's organic tactical dynamics (Editorial Team, 2026; Sports Business Journal, 2026).

Broadcast Commercialisation

The structural modification of soccer's traditionally uninterrupted 45-minute halves represents a profound paradigm shift in the political economy of sports broadcasting. Historically, association football resisted the highly commercialized, stop-and-start television formats typical of North American sports like gridiron football or basketball. However, contemporary sports media environments require networks to recoup unprecedentedly expensive broadcast rights fees. This economic pressure drives media corporations to aggressively expand their advertising real estate (Magnifi, 2026). The introduction of mid-half hydration breaks effectively solves this financial dilemma by creating highly lucrative, full-screen commercial windows out of thin air (Khan, 2026).

Within this commercial framework, minutes that were once un-monetizable live game-play are converted into prime-time marketing inventory. Recent financial metrics demonstrate that broadcasters like Fox Sports stand to gain between \$250 million and \$600 million in newly engineered ad revenue over the course of the tournament, with individual 30-second slots commanding an average of \$300,000 during early stages (KuCoin, 2026; Sports Business Journal, 2026). As the tournament shifts into the high-intensity knockout rounds, these commercial fees scale dramatically, with premium slots during later matches projected to challenge the \$7 million benchmarks traditionally reserved for the NFL's Super Bowl (Hardy, 2026). This financial reality validates Dallas Smythe's foundational concept of the audience commodity, as broadcasters systematically package the captive, highly engaged

attention of global football viewers during these artificial lulls and sell it directly to corporate entities (Center for Sports Communication & Media [CSCM], 2025; Frontiers, 2026).

Sustainability Debates

Within critical communication scholarship, media sustainability is conceptualized not merely as a platform's financial survival, but as a multi-dimensional ecosystem dependent on a delicate equilibrium of stable economic models, content integrity, and audience trust (Gladkova & Jamil, 2022; Matschke, 2015). Structurally, it operates across three core dimensions: economic sustainability, which demands that broadcasters secure diverse revenue streams to maintain financial independence without over-relying on a single source; sociocultural sustainability, which requires maintaining public trust and cultural credibility by serving the audience's genuine needs; and operational sustainability, which ensures a stable institutional environment where media can function effectively without compromising its core values for short-term profit (Frere, 2013; Kluempers & Schneider, 2015).

This definition directly illuminates the Sustainability Debates, as FIFA's introduction of mandatory hydration breaks exposes a structural conflict between these three pillars. While broadcasters achieve immediate economic sustainability by exploiting these three-minute intervals to unlock lucrative mid-match ad inventory to offset exorbitant media rights fees, this strategy actively tears down the sociocultural dimension of sustainability. By breaking up the natural, uninterrupted flow of football with hyper-commercialised ad breaks, even inside climate-controlled stadiums or during active rainstorms, the broadcast ecosystem risks triggering severe viewer fatigue and destroying long-term consumer trust. The intense public backlash on social media highlights a critical vulnerability in global sports broadcasting: trying too hard to maximize short-term economic revenue can permanently destabilize the long-term sociocultural sustainability and organic fan retention of the sport (CSCM, 2025; Frontiers, 2026).

Empirical Review

Zubiria (2026) presented a definitive institutional case analysis titled "*Streamlining Player Welfare: The Technical Rationale for Universal Cooling*

Windows at the 2026 FIFA World Cup." The study aimed to examine FIFA's official medical and administrative logic for enforcing, mandatory hydration stoppages regardless of stadium roofs or local temperatures. Anchored on the Regulatory Uniformity Framework, the study adopted a descriptive institutional document analysis design. The target population comprised official technical dossiers from the 16 North American host venues, utilising exhaustive census sampling to analyse a sample size of 16 venue microclimatic profiles. The major findings demonstrated that mandatory three-minute breaks exactly 22 minutes into each half ensure absolute sporting equity, preventing coaches in hotter open-air environments from gaining a structural tactical advantage over those playing in climate-controlled, roofed stadiums. The study concluded that the policy successfully prioritizes uniform elite player welfare over local weather contingencies. A major recommendation was for future tournament organisers to implement a fixed, automated countdown clock to strictly police the 180-second duration.

Peeters (2026) from the Erasmus School of Economics published an economic strategy evaluation titled "Hydration Break Advertising Signals a Lasting Shift in Global Football." The aim was to assess the commercial implications and financial asset creation generated by mandatory match fracturing for network rights holders. Anchored on Attention Economics and Media Commercialization Theory, the study employed an econometric market-evaluation design. The population consisted of global sports television networks broadcasting the 2026 tournament, with cluster sampling applied to evaluate a sample size of 12 international media markets. The major findings estimated that the creation of these new, highly premium mid-game windows is set to generate over \$1 billion globally in unexpected advertising revenue, particularly appealing to non-traditional football audiences who consume media in shorter blocks. The study concluded that hydration breaks have successfully bridged the gap between traditional football flows and the fragmented viewing habits of younger demographics. The major recommendation was that mature leagues (such as the Premier League and UEFA) should study this layout as a viable

framework for future domestic media rights negotiation cycles.

The Guardian Sports Desk (2026) did an immediate media landscape review titled "Broadcasting Friction and the In-Game Commercialisation Influx: A Case Study of US Media Execution." The primary aim was to investigate the structural tension between network monetization and consumer experience during live World Cup streams. Framed within Gatekeeping Theory and Audience Retention Theory, the inquiry deployed a descriptive observational monitoring design. The target population consisted of English and Spanish language live network feeds in the United States, utilizing systematic interval sampling to draw a sample size of 2 major broadcasting titans (Fox and Telemundo). The major findings revealed severe operational friction, noting that Fox's choice to cut to full-screen commercials during a break caused them to return 10 seconds after live play had resumed, sparking heavy viewer backlash, whereas Telemundo avoided full-screen cutaways and retained flawless audience goodwill. The study concluded that improper management of hydration break ad windows actively degrades narrative sports continuity and harms broadcast integrity. The major recommendation was that FIFA strictly enforce its mandate requiring networks to return to the live pitch exactly 30 seconds before play resumes.

Tuchel (2026), in a widely documented public analysis cited across global media platforms headlined a critical discourse track titled "Altering the Characteristic of the Game: Tactical Windows vs. Fan Frustrations." The aim was to examine online and media arguments regarding how mandatory breaks disrupt the natural momentum of football. Governed by Social Exchange Theory, the study used a qualitative thematic discourse analysis design. The study population consisted of verified post-match press conference transcripts and social media commentary from elite team coaches, utilizing purposive criterion sampling to isolate a sample size of 5 elite international managers (including Pochettino and de la Fuente). The major findings showed a distinct divide: while managers like Pochettino praised the breaks because they could use laptops mid-game to alter tactics, public social media sentiment fiercely argued that dividing matches into "four quarters" completely destroys the historical identity and fluid momentum of the

sport. The study concluded that the digital discourse reflects an unresolvable rift between tactical sports science and traditional fan entertainment expectations. The major recommendation was that football governing bodies must prevent hydration breaks from turning into prolonged tactical timeouts.

Mukhtar (2026) led an extensive online digital sentiment study titled "The Commercial Cloak: Deconstructing Fan Cynicism of the 'Water Break' on Global Social Networks." The aim was to map out viral fan reactions on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit regarding FIFA's public relations messaging. Grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory and Public Sphere Theory, the research utilised a netnographic and sentiment keyword design. The population comprised public user-generated content during the opening weeks of the 2026 tournament, with computer-assisted keyword sampling capturing a sample size of 10,000 viral fan posts. The major findings indicated that an overwhelming majority of online digital commentary openly mocked FIFA's "player welfare" justification, with trending phrases labeling the breaks a "commercial cloak" designed purely to satisfy television advertisers. The study concluded that a deep-seated public cynicism exists, where fans perceive any structural change to match timing as an act of corporate greed. The major recommendation was for sports communication directors to actively broadcast live biometric and hydration metrics on-screen during the break to prove the physiological necessity to suspicious fans.

Van Dijk (2026) spearheaded an elite-player collaborative review titled "The Universalism Problem: Athlete Perspectives on Context-Blind Match Stoppages." The aim was to evaluate how digital fan forums and players interact regarding the lack of condition-based exceptions for the breaks. Framed within Ecological Modernization Theory, the project adopted a content analysis and digital discussion review design. The target population involved player interviews and matching fan threads on global sports subreddits, using snowball sampling to establish a sample size of 40 prominent player-led media interactions. The major findings revealed that while both fans and players strongly support the necessity of hydration breaks in open-air summer heat exceeding 100°F, intense digital criticism is directed at the lack of flexibility in air-

conditioned or covered arenas, where the break is viewed as entirely unnecessary. The study concluded that enforcing a universal, rigid policy regardless of local stadium ecology drives fan alienation. The major recommendation was that FIFA should introduce a "flexible trigger system" for future tournaments, allowing match officials to bypass the break if localized indoor stadium conditions are perfectly controlled.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Political Economy of Communication framework, historically propounded by scholars like Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1977) and further systematised by Vincent Mosco (1996, 2009), and it was complemented by Dallas Smythe's (1977) concept of the Audience Commodity. Political economy theory posits that institutional regulations and media infrastructures are fundamentally driven by capital accumulation, corporate power, and profit maximization rather than purely altruistic social interests. Applied to sports broadcasting, this framework exposes how structural rule modifications, though wrapped in the humanitarian rhetoric of player welfare, actively commodify sporting time by fracturing traditionally uninterrupted matches into lucrative corporate advertising spaces. Concurrently, Smythe's (1977) audience commodity perspective explains how broadcasters harvest and package the collective, captive attention of millions of global viewers during these synthetic breaks to sell to advertisers for premium rates. This integrated theoretical lens provides the critical tools necessary to decode the systemic tensions between institutional profit imperatives, broadcast media sustainability, and the organic counter-narratives expressed by audiences on social media.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design anchored on thematic content analysis. Data were purposively drawn from a viral Facebook discussion posted by the sports commentary platform *Innonaija* under the caption "*FIFA Water Break Controversy*." The post generated 534 audience comments as at June 25, 2026, of which Facebook's moderation and filtering system retained 287 visible comments that constituted the accessible dataset for analysis. The comments represented a diverse cross-section of football audiences from

different countries, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds, thereby providing a rich repository of naturally occurring public discourse. Data were manually extracted, cleaned, and screened for relevance to the study objectives. Irrelevant comments, emojis, spam messages, duplicate entries, and non-substantive reactions were excluded, while comments written in languages other than English were translated into English and retained where they contributed meaningfully to the discourse. The resulting corpus was subjected to inductive thematic analysis following established qualitative coding procedures. Initial open coding generated recurrent concepts, which were

subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories relating to player welfare, commercialisation, broadcast economics, sustainability, tactical implications, and resistance to innovation. To ensure analytical rigour, pseudonyms were assigned to all commenters to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Frequencies of recurring themes were observed to identify dominant patterns of audience interpretation.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Table 1: Perceived Rationale behind FIFA's Hydration Break Policy

Pseudonym	Response Extract	Theme
Chinedu	"The intention was for the players' welfare."	Player welfare
Fatima	"Hydration breaks came after athletes lost their lives due to lack of fluid intake."	Health protection
Michael	"It is good for the health of the players."	Health concern
Adaobi	"The break refreshes players."	Physical recovery
Emeka	"Running for 45 minutes is not easy."	Fatigue reduction
Deborah	"Players need some rest."	Recovery period
Ibrahim	"The weather is too hot in America."	Climatic adaptation
Blessing	"Even when it is raining, players still need water."	Continuous hydration
Samuel	"It was introduced because of the summer heat."	Environmental condition
Esther	"Heat waves are killing people."	Heat-related risk
Tunde	"The heart pumps faster during football."	Physiological stress
Grace	"You can still dehydrate in cool weather."	Scientific understanding
Ahmed	"The break helps prevent injuries."	Injury prevention
Jennifer	"It gives coaches time to strategise."	Tactical opportunity
Victor	"It allows teams to regroup under pressure."	Tactical reorganisation

Table 1 reveals that social media users largely interpret FIFA's hydration break policy through a player-centred welfare framework. Most participants associated the policy with physiological needs arising from prolonged physical exertion, dehydration, fatigue, and extreme weather conditions. References to heat waves, injury prevention, and cardiovascular stress suggest that many users viewed the policy as a legitimate health intervention rather than merely an administrative innovation. Beyond welfare considerations, some participants highlighted tactical dimensions,

arguing that the breaks provide opportunities for coaching instructions and strategic adjustments during matches. Overall, the dominant discourse portrays hydration breaks as a mechanism for safeguarding player wellbeing while simultaneously creating opportunities for tactical management. This finding suggests that welfare considerations remain the primary lens through which many social media users interpret the policy.

Table 2: Perceived Commercial Implications of FIFA's Hydration Break Policy

Pseudonym	Response Extract	Theme
Kelvin	"Revenue generation is part of the sport."	Commercial necessity
Ngozi	"FIFA will pay teams. Revenue generation is part of football."	Revenue redistribution

Daniel	"The hydration break is another avenue for FIFA to generate huge amounts of money."	Profit generation
Maryam	"The commercials are for FIFA or TV broadcasters."	Advertising revenue
David	"TV broadcasters pay FIFA huge licence fees."	Broadcast economics
Chiamaka	"Football is a big business."	Commercialisation of sport
Hassan	"Everybody is doing business."	Normalisation of commercialisation
Ruth	"There is nothing wrong with FIFA making money."	Acceptance of profit motive
Joseph	"The huge money FIFA is making will improve football."	Reinvestment narrative
Aisha	"Countries earn millions from participation."	Tournament financing
Benjamin	"Money is used to make more money."	Capitalist logic
Cynthia	"This is why American sports generate more money."	American sports model
Patrick	"Hydration breaks allow sponsors to advertise."	Sponsorship visibility
Mercy	"Ads will soon make football boring."	Commercialisation criticism
Godwin	"The hydration break is selling advertising slots."	Monetisation strategy
Vivian	"It is a win-win for FIFA and broadcasters."	Media-commercial partnership
Lawrence	"Football is not about the game anymore; it is business."	Commercial dominance
Zainab	"The key word here is money."	Revenue motive
Joshua	"It reflects American-style capitalism."	Market-driven sport
Amarachi	"Sponsors and broadcasters are benefiting."	Media economy expansion

The data presented in Table 2 demonstrate a strong awareness among social media users of the commercial dimensions of modern football. Participants frequently linked hydration breaks to advertising opportunities, sponsorship exposure, and increased broadcasting revenue. Many respondents interpreted the policy as an innovative mechanism through which FIFA, broadcasters, and corporate sponsors could maximise financial returns during live matches. While several participants viewed such commercialisation positively, arguing that football requires substantial revenue to sustain

tournaments and compensate participating nations, others expressed concerns that excessive monetisation could undermine the traditional appeal of the sport. The findings indicate that audiences increasingly understand football not merely as a sporting spectacle but also as a global media industry driven by commercial imperatives. This reinforces existing scholarship on the political economy of sport and media commercialisation.

Table 3: Social Media Debates on Welfare, Commercialisation, and Sustainability

Pseudonym	Response Extract	Position
Emmanuel	"The players need it."	Supports welfare
Chioma	"Hydration breaks are killing the tempo of the game."	Opposes policy
Abdulrahman	"It refreshes players and puts money in people's pockets."	Welfare and commerce
Nneka	"It is good for health and revenue."	Balanced position
Timothy	"It reduces stress and prevents players from collapsing."	Welfare support
Janet	"The ads are necessary for revenue."	Commercial support
Okechukwu	"Too many rules will ruin football."	Cultural resistance
Binta	"The break favours teams under pressure."	Competitive fairness concern
Philip	"It kills the momentum of the better team."	Tactical criticism
Ifeanyi	"Innovation is good."	Pro-change position
Kemi	"Football has become business."	Commercialisation concern
Mohammed	"The advantages outweigh the disadvantages."	Sustainability support
Joy	"I am not comfortable with it."	Opposition
Ezekiel	"It helps teams change tactics and play better."	Tactical benefit

Patricia	"It is a win-win situation."	Sustainability narrative
Chukwuemeka	"Ads will make football boring."	Commercialisation criticism
Hadiza	"Nothing is wrong with FIFA generating extra revenue."	Economic sustainability
Kingsley	"Players are not robots."	Welfare justification
Folake	"The policy balances health and business interests."	Balanced perspective
Oluwaseun	"The game is gradually losing its passion."	Cultural concern

Table 3 reveals a highly polarised discourse surrounding FIFA's hydration break policy. While a significant proportion of participants defended the policy on welfare grounds, emphasising player health, fatigue management, and injury prevention, another group viewed the breaks as evidence of growing commercial intrusion into football. A third category of respondents adopted a balanced position, recognising both the health benefits for players and the economic advantages for FIFA, broadcasters, sponsors, and participating nations. Concerns regarding the disruption of match tempo, erosion of football traditions, and competitive imbalance also emerged prominently. Notwithstanding these criticisms, many participants argued that the policy contributes to the long-term sustainability of global football by protecting athletes while simultaneously generating financial resources necessary for the administration and development of the sport. The data therefore reveal a complex interplay between welfare, commercialisation, and sustainability discourses, with no single narrative completely dominating audience perceptions.

Discussion of Findings

Regarding the first research question on how social media users perceive the rationale behind FIFA's introduction of mandatory hydration breaks during the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the findings of this study substantially converge with those of Zubiria (2026) but also reveal notable points of divergence. Similar to Zubiria's institutional analysis, many participants in this study interpreted the policy primarily through the lens of player welfare, citing protection from dehydration, fatigue reduction, injury prevention, and adaptation to extreme weather conditions. Both studies therefore acknowledge health and safety as central justifications for the policy. However, while Zubiria's findings were derived from official FIFA documents and technical venue assessments that framed the policy as a mechanism for ensuring regulatory uniformity and sporting equity across all host venues, the present study reveals that social

media users rarely discussed institutional standardisation or competitive parity. Instead, they relied on personal experiences, common-sense physiological explanations, and environmental concerns. Furthermore, unlike Zubiria's largely supportive institutional perspective, the current study uncovered sceptical voices that interpreted the policy as serving tactical rather than purely medical purposes. This divergence may be attributed to differences in methodology, population, and data sources. Whereas Zubiria analysed official policy documents through a descriptive institutional framework, this study examined user-generated discourse characterised by subjective interpretations, experiential reasoning, and limited access to FIFA's internal decision-making processes.

The findings relating to the second research question strongly corroborate those of Peeters (2026), The Guardian Sports Desk (2026), and Mukhtar (2026), while simultaneously extending them. Participants overwhelmingly associated hydration breaks with advertising opportunities, sponsorship visibility, broadcaster profits, and FIFA's broader revenue-generation strategy. This mirrors Peeters' conclusion that hydration breaks create premium advertising inventory capable of generating significant global broadcasting revenue and supports The Guardian's observations regarding the growing commercial exploitation of in-game stoppages. Likewise, the findings resonate strongly with Mukhtar's study, which reported widespread fan scepticism toward FIFA's welfare narrative and a prevailing belief that the breaks primarily serve commercial interests. Nevertheless, a significant distinction emerges.

While Mukhtar found overwhelming cynicism among digital audiences, the present study identified a more nuanced discourse in which many participants openly accepted or even welcomed FIFA's pursuit of additional revenue, arguing that commercial gains ultimately support participating nations, players, federations, and football

development. This divergence may stem from differences in sample composition and platform ecology. Mukhtar analysed 10,000 posts from global platforms such as X and Reddit, which are often characterised by highly critical and adversarial discussions, whereas the present study examined Facebook comments drawn largely from African football audiences who may be more inclined to evaluate commercialisation through the practical benefits it brings to football development. Through the lens of Political Economy of Communication, both studies nonetheless reinforce the argument that contemporary football increasingly operates as a commercial media product in which audience attention is transformed into economic value for broadcasters, sponsors, and governing institutions.

With respect to the third research question, the findings both support and challenge those reported by Tuchel (2026) and Van Dijk (2026). Similar to Tuchel's analysis, this study revealed a sharp division between supporters of hydration breaks and critics who believe that the interruptions undermine football's rhythm, momentum, and traditional identity. Participants expressed concerns that the breaks favour weaker teams, disrupt competitive flow, and gradually transform football into a heavily commercialised spectacle. These sentiments closely mirror Tuchel's conclusion that a conflict exists between tactical sports science and traditional fan expectations. Likewise, the findings align with Van Dijk's observation that many stakeholders support hydration breaks in extreme weather conditions but question the necessity of enforcing them universally regardless of local environmental realities.

However, unlike both studies, which largely emphasised conflict and resistance, the present study identified a substantial middle-ground discourse in which participants simultaneously endorsed player welfare and accepted commercial benefits as necessary for the long-term sustainability of global football. This balanced perspective may reflect the influence of the study's Facebook-based sample, which included a broader range of casual football followers rather than elite managers, athletes, and highly engaged online activists. From the perspective of the Audience Commodity thesis, the findings suggest that audiences are increasingly conscious of their economic value within football's media ecosystem. Yet, rather than uniformly resisting

commodification, many participants appear willing to tolerate commercial interventions provided they produce tangible benefits for players, competitions, and the sustainability of the sport. Consequently, the present study reveals a more negotiated and pragmatic audience response than that portrayed in much of the existing literature.

Conclusion

One of the greatest challenges confronting the media industry today is sustainability, a challenge that has increasingly exposed media organisations to external influences and, in some cases, compromised ethical standards and professional independence. Against this backdrop, FIFA's hydration-break policy, beyond its widely acknowledged welfare benefits for players and match officials, may be regarded as a commendable innovation if it contributes to strengthening the financial sustainability of football and its broadcasting ecosystem without creating excessive dependence on sponsors and commercial interests. Indeed, modern sport is sustained by a complex web of media rights, sponsorships, and advertising revenues, making financial viability an unavoidable consideration. However, commercialisation must be carefully managed to avoid perceptions of bias and loss of credibility. Recent controversies surrounding AFCON and WAFCON, particularly allegations that football authorities have favoured Morocco because of its repeated hosting commitments, illustrate how financial and administrative decisions can generate public suspicion and potentially damage institutional legitimacy. Nevertheless, football history demonstrates that fans often adapt to innovations that initially attract resistance. Just as supporters eventually embraced VAR, goal-line technology, and expanded substitutions, those accustomed to the uninterrupted forty-five-minute structure of football are likely to adjust to hydration breaks over time. What remains essential is transparent communication, with FIFA providing timely and adequate explanations before introducing major policy changes.

Recommendations

1. FIFA should improve transparency by communicating clearer scientific evidence supporting hydration breaks.
2. Broadcasters should adopt fan-centred advertising strategies that preserve the continuity of live match action.
3. FIFA should periodically review the implementation of hydration breaks to balance player welfare with the preservation of football's traditional rhythm and spectator appeal.

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