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Sports Symbols and Public Participation: A Study on the Effect of La'eeb's Interactive Ritual Chain [Postprint]

Authors: Siyu Jin

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Abstract

In 2022, La'eeb, the first “carbon-neutral mascot” in World Cup history, debuted at the opening ceremony, sparking widespread discussion among netizens and football enthusiasts. The mascot attracted considerable attention, generating extensive sharing, discussion, and short-form video content across social networks, and even inspiring widespread imitation online. This study therefore employs a questionnaire-based approach to investigate the effective communication outcomes and interactive ritual chains formed by La'eeb as a micro-social symbol within social media networks. The findings reveal that during the Qatar World Cup, topics arising from the dissemination and appropriation of La'eeb facilitated sustained and highly engaged interactions among internet users and tournament viewers, thereby illustrating the application of interactive ritual theory to micro-social communication symbols in the context of interpersonal exchange. To a certain extent, La'eeb exerted a significant influence on the promotion of Qatar World Cup events.

Full Text

Sports Symbols and Public Participation: A Study on the Effect of La'eeb's Interactive Ritual Chain

Siyu Jin

College of Humanities, Anqing Normal University, China

Corresponding author E-mail: budingzuihaochine@163.com

Abstract: In 2022, the first “zero carbon mascot” of the World Cup, La'eeb, was unveiled at the opening ceremony and sparked widespread discussion among netizens and fans. The mascot attracted considerable attention, generating continuous sharing, discussion, and short videos across social media platforms, and even inspiring a wave of imitation online. This study employs questionnaire

surveys to investigate the effective communication outcomes and interactive ritual chains formed by La'eeb as a micro social symbol within social media networks. The findings reveal that during the Qatar World Cup, topics triggered by La'eeb's dissemination and selection fostered relatively intense and sustained interactions among internet users and World Cup viewers. This reflects the development of micro social communication symbols within the theory of interactive rituals in the context of micro-level interpersonal interaction. To a certain extent, La'eeb significantly contributed to promoting the Qatar World Cup events.

Key words: Interactive ritual chain; Symbolic interaction; Communication effect

1 Introduction

In the winter of 2022, the 22nd FIFA World Cup concluded in Qatar. Influenced by this major sporting event, the tournament mascot “La'eeb” sparked an online wave of imitation, ranging from highly skilled craftsmen to national imitation shows, as netizens celebrated the World Cup in their own creative ways. Amid this collective carnival, the spontaneous creation and dissemination of La'eeb-related content by netizens emerged as a notable phenomenon. Our observations suggest that La'eeb's popularity stemmed primarily from its friendly “dumpling (wonton) skin” image, its rich Middle Eastern cultural characteristics, and the impact of bright, simple musical rhythms on platforms like TikTok, where La'eeb content was repeatedly shared. This operational model, with its basic elements and dynamic mechanisms, readily forms an interactive ritual chain that generates reposts and ultimately leads to viral dissemination. This phenomenon raises several questions: Why did La'eeb achieve such effective communication? Which key factors were at work in producing these favorable communication outcomes? How do these motivations influence La'eeb's dissemination, making it both typical and specific? And how effective was it?

2.1 Communication of Sports Symbols

Symbols are perceived as carriers of meaning, and the role of sports symbols in mass communication has attracted scholarly attention from multiple perspectives. In his 1957 *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes began with “The World of Wrestling” and analyzed sporting events from a micro-semiotic perspective, arguing that sports performances materialize the meaning of bodily “language” and transform it into a visible ideographic practice for audiences [1]. In his 1992 book *Olympics—Agenda Analysis*, Pierre Bourdieu examined sports fields from a semiotic perspective, analyzing the relationship between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, to demonstrate how scenes displayed in sporting arenas appear and develop as doubly hidden objects in symbolic form.

Chinese scholar Zhou Ersan has conducted detailed studies of Chinese sports activities from a macro-semiotic perspective, employing Roland Barthes' signifier-

signified relationship (Feng, 2022). His research demonstrates that sports function as symbols of competition, health, communication, and leisure entertainment [2]. In his *Discussion on Non-verbal Symbols in Sports* (He, 2009), He Pingxiang examined various symbols in sports competitions, including gestures and body language, from a linguistic research perspective. His findings indicate that non-verbal symbols in sports also serve functions of language substitution, supplementation, emphasis, negation, and repetition [3]. Although these studies investigate sports symbol communication from macro perspectives, they neglect research and discussion at the micro level.

2.2 Literature Review of Interactive Ritual Theory

After Charles Cooley (1909) proposed the concept of symbolic interaction in 1909, it received considerable attention from scholars worldwide and generated substantial research outcomes. In interpersonal communication, W.I. Thomas studied the importance of human subjective factors in determining social behavior, complementing the theory from the perspective of human intellect in social construction processes [4]. In psychology, George Herbert Mead supplemented this theory by examining the relationship between individual thought and action, explaining individual consciousness through social action [5]. In symbolic interaction, Herbert Blumer enhanced the theory through studies of individual interaction phenomena. In his 2004 *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Randall Collins systematically elaborated on the origins, constituent elements, operating mechanisms, and applications of interactive ritual chain theory, integrating relevant sociological theoretical traditions. He proposed the “interaction ritual chains” theory in an attempt to unify micro and macro sociology, arguing that in micro-level processes, interactive ritual (IR) constitutes the most fundamental human activity and the basis of all sociological research [6].

Chinese scholars Liu Fengfeng and Shi Wenrui have combined Chinese politeness research phenomena with interactive ritual pragmatics theory (Liu, Shi, 2022), proposing that future research on interactive ritual pragmatics in China should integrate more localized Chinese research to contribute to “telling China’s stories well and making China’s voice heard” [7]. Yang Jiaxin has conducted detailed research on interactive ritual chains in Chinese sports event communication from a scene narration perspective. His study (Yang, 2022) demonstrates that in the all-media context, the role of mimetic scenes and narrative mechanisms in constructing interactive ritual chains for sports events helps understand the deep motivations behind inter-media and cultural dialogue, providing a replicable model [8]. However, these studies have not examined interactive ritual phenomena from the perspective of micro symbolic communication in social fields [9] and therefore have not addressed questions regarding the role of micro social symbols in forming interactive ritual chains and achieving effective communication outcomes [10].

2.3 Question Raising

Therefore, this article draws on interactive ritual chain theory to address the following questions: Which key factors contribute to La'eeb's effective communication, and how effective are they? What are the operational modes, basic elements, and dynamic mechanisms of these ritual activities? How can La'eeb's dissemination be explained through "interactive ritual chain theory"? And what factors strengthen, weaken, or alter the social, cultural, and emotional impacts specific to La'eeb's dissemination?

3 Research Methods and Data Analysis

This study employs questionnaire surveys to address these questions. During data collection, questionnaires were distributed primarily to World Cup audiences through a combination of online and offline methods, including email, individual distribution, and group distribution.

3.1.1 Assumption Establishment

Based on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The more specific and perceptible the designed IP image, the more inclined viewers are to browse and watch it.

H2: The more distinct the cultural characteristics conveyed, the more inclined viewers are to share (like [11], forward, comment, select).

H3: The brighter the rhythm of the matched music, the more likely it is to be played repeatedly.

To test these hypotheses, this study sampled the population and prepared a questionnaire using survey methodology.

3.2.1 Description of Sample Characteristics

The survey collected 221 questionnaires, with a gender distribution of 49.32% male and 50.68% female. The 23-26 age group comprised the largest proportion at 41.2%. In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents were junior college students, totaling 90 individuals (40.72%).

3.2.2 Description of Structural Analysis Results

(1) The more specific and perceptible the designed IP image, the more likely the audience is to browse and watch it

Pearson's correlation analysis examining the relationship between IP image perceptibility and audience browsing tendency yielded $p = 0.029 < 0.05$, indicating a significant correlation with a correlation coefficient of -0.147^* . Hypothesis 1 is supported: "The more specific and perceptible the designed IP image, the more inclined the audience is to browse and watch it."

This finding primarily reflects how, with the deep integration of contemporary information society and media, digital media has demonstrated advantages in channel communication and information competition by transforming planar, static art into three-dimensional, dynamic forms [12]. This transformation not only broadens traditional media expression but also substantially enhances the expressiveness and infectiousness of communication content [13]. In La'eeb's communication process, digital media served as the carrier for its brand communication, playing a significant role in image building and promotion. This is confirmed in our research, where La'eeb's production and dissemination, its contact with Qatar World Cup spectators, and the interpersonal communication and interaction it evoked all occurred within a digital context. La'eeb's external image embodies its spirit; its charmingly naive and dynamic appearance created a certain degree of attraction and novelty for World Cup audiences, prompting them to consciously or unconsciously communicate with one another, thereby promoting higher brand loyalty among audiences [14].

(2) The more distinct the cultural characteristics conveyed, the more viewers are inclined to share (like, forward, comment, select)

Analysis of the relationship between perceived cultural characteristic distinctiveness and audience sharing desire revealed $p = 0.009 < 0.01$, with a correlation coefficient of -0.113^* , indicating a significant correlation. H2 is supported, meaning that “the more distinct the cultural characteristics conveyed, the more viewers are inclined to share (like, forward, comment, select).”

This occurs primarily because when a region's (country's or area's) brand culture aligns with local cultural traits, it more readily triggers empathetic experiences based on consumers' non-functional value appeals [15], enabling audiences' dual identification with both brand culture and regional culture.

World Cup mascot designs typically represent the host country's cultural, regional, and customary characteristics. Reviewing previous World Cup mascots reveals commonalities: first, they must relate to football, and second, they should possess distinctive, typical cultural characteristics that facilitate memory formation.

During La'eeb's communication process, its unique design inspiration and positive, beautiful messages provided natural psychological comfort to audiences, establishing a two-way emotional and value communication bridge between brand and customers [16]. Reports indicate that La'eeb's design inspiration derives from the iconic Arab white headscarf, reimagined as a flying, dynamic, and interesting headscarf rather than a traditional static one. Its facial expressions are rich and varied, but most often greet people with a smile, creating a pleasant and relaxed feeling during interaction. Simultaneously, in Arabic, “La'eeb” means “a highly skilled player,” conveying beautiful hopes for enjoying football's joy. Such a mascot with rich cultural connotations and distinctive regional characteristics fostered sharing desires among World Cup audiences. With its positive symbolic significance, La'eeb helped players create unforgettable moments and

landmark goals in World Cup history while working with audiences to promote the Qatar World Cup viewing tide.

(3) The brighter the rhythm of the matched music, the more likely the audience is to repeat it

Analysis of the relationship between matched music rhythm and audience repetition tendency yielded $p = 0.003 < 0.01$, with a correlation coefficient of 0.061. H3 is supported, meaning that “the brighter the rhythm of the matched music, the more likely the audience is to repeat it.”

This primarily reflects how, with metaverse technology advancement, user needs have become more diverse. The dramatic changes in how humans access information, experience, and perceive from a metaverse perspective will significantly alter human communication paradigms, shifting from existing information-sharing-oriented paradigms to future common-experience-oriented paradigms [17]. Simultaneously, telepresence attached to media technology has continuously improved with technological development and network technology iteration.

In La’eeb’s dissemination process, as a micro social symbol, La’eeb was transmitted to audiences through the combination of certain musical rhythms with its lively, vivid appearance. This represents an art of vocal language, where La’eeb’s musical rhythm plays a crucial role in its dissemination [18]. From an artistic perspective, rhythm is the core factor that plays a key, leading role—the soul of language art. In specific communication processes, rhythm division, cadence, priority repetition, and represented emotions all constitute important dimensions affecting La’eeb-related video dissemination. The combination of perceptible images, perfect visual images, and lively musical rhythms—the convergence of these multidimensional positive factors—impacts audiences’ vision, hearing, and soul, substantially enhancing communication effects.

Descriptive analysis of independent and dependent variables produced the following results: Regarding La’eeb’s attractiveness, 39.8% of audiences selected “rich cultural characteristics” as the primary reason, representing the highest proportion. In response to the question “How important do you consider the distinctiveness of cultural characteristics conveyed by the Qatar World Cup?”, 34.84% of audiences selected “very important,” also the highest proportion.

These results demonstrate that, as a micro social symbol, La’eeb significantly promoted the Qatar World Cup. Topics triggered by La’eeb’s dissemination and selection gathered and sustained interactions between netizens and World Cup viewers. Throughout this process, netizens and viewers continuously devoted attention and emotion, unconsciously forming group member identity [19]. This shows that La’eeb’s vivid, lovely appearance, combined with distinctive cultural characteristics and lively musical rhythm, played a significant role in micro-level interpersonal interaction scenes. It encouraged World Cup audiences to gather and interact in real space, with participants devoting attention and emotion while perceiving others’ attention and emotional input during gathering and

contact, thereby forming emotional resonance among individuals, group member identity, and collective excitement for joint action. Sharing La'eeb-related videos in specific contexts (like, forward, comment, select) represents a product of this collective excitement. Therefore, as a micro social symbol, La'eeb played an important role in consolidating social consensus and resolving individual identity dilemmas within social network contexts.

4.1 Focusing on Common Experiences: Redefining the Theory of Interactive Ritual Chains

This study examined interaction forms and communication effects among the public in social media communication through questionnaire surveys, attempting to answer which key factors operate in producing effective communication outcomes and what their roles are. The research confirms that Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are all supported.

To a certain extent, the Qatar World Cup mascot La'eeb achieved phased success in facilitating event promotion. This occurred because, during the Qatar World Cup, La'eeb's dissemination as a micro social symbol—through its specific, perceptible IP image, transmission of distinctive cultural characteristics, and accompanying lively musical rhythms—all promoted La'eeb's dissemination process, with netizens willingly participating in secondary dissemination.

During the Qatar World Cup, long-term football fans and “pseudo-fans” who participated enthusiastically only during the World Cup gathered on social networks to express opinions about specific matches, results, star coaches, techniques, and related news. Enthusiasm for World Cup football lottery participation could be promoted through social networks to encourage national sharing. The emergence and promotion of La'eeb as a sports communication symbol integrating high recognizability, high cultural value, and strong rhythmic matching helped modern people achieve a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

This study demonstrates La'eeb's strong communication effect as a micro social communication symbol among World Cup audiences and its social impact on interpersonal communication, reflecting the development of micro social communication symbols on interactive ritual theory in micro-level interpersonal interaction contexts. It also provides a reference for new concepts integrating traditional elements with modern culture in cross-cultural communication, enriching communication channels for integrating Arab Qatari culture into the beautiful game of football.

4.2 Beware of Group Carnival: Rethinking the Theory of Interactive Ritual

Notably, this study also found that sports symbol communication phenomena among the public in social media can produce certain negative impacts. When investigating “What impacts has La'eeb's explosion brought?”, 37.56% of audi-

ences believed it would lead to a “crisis of minority cultural survival and ethnic cultural identity,” while 29.86% believed it would cause negative impacts of “aesthetic simplification, reducing aesthetic level and appreciation.” Both proportions are substantial and warrant vigilance and reflection. Especially in this era of transformation with increasingly diverse values and chaotic social conditions, we must call for a return to excellent traditional national and ethnic cultures.

The 2022 Qatar World Cup was both a football feast and a social networking feast, forming a special interactive ritual chain for mascot La’eeb’s dissemination and sharing among audiences. In the current information society, the advent of intelligent communication era has spawned a new information dissemination model enabling whole-population sharing through social networks. Simultaneously, this dissemination model is gradually becoming a social awareness and consumption culture that guides the public. Therefore, we must remain vigilant about media technology popularization and dissemination, and whether media power’s control over the consumption field is swallowing or has already swallowed our individual subjective consciousness. To this end, we need to correctly utilize online media, balance perceptual and rational consumption in the intelligent communication era, return to self-subjectivity, and accumulate efforts to achieve rational return and reconstruction of consensus.

5 Summary

As this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, most Qatar World Cup audiences were in home isolation and prevention stages. Internet access and usage time increased substantially compared to previous periods, with increased media contact frequency introducing a certain degree of contingency. Additionally, due to this research’s short timeframe, certain deficiencies exist in analyzing and investigating La’eeb’s communication effects. In future theoretical research on interactive ritual chains, researchers may need to focus on studying symbolic communication phenomena in more general social fields. To expand research and practice in this area, they should note that symbolic communication’s significance lies not only in the symbol itself but also in the entire process and links of human communication.

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