

XU, Longhua, WANG, Lei and LUO, Yanni. Multimodal Discourse Interpretation of the Paris Olympics Mascot. *Quality in Sport*. 2024;32:55976 eISSN 2450-3118.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.12775/QS.2024.32.55976>
<https://apcz.umk.pl/QS/article/view/55976>

The journal has been 20 points in the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of Poland parametric evaluation. Annex to the announcement of the Minister of Higher Education and Science of 05.01.2024. No. 32553.

Has a Journal's Unique Identifier: 201398. Scientific disciplines assigned: Economics and finance (Field of social sciences); Management and Quality Sciences (Field of social sciences).

Punkty Ministerialne z 2019 - aktualny rok 20 punktów. Załącznik do komunikatu Ministra Szkolnictwa Wyższego i Nauki z dnia 05.01.2024 r. Lp. 32553. Posiada Unikatowy Identyfikator Czasopisma: 201398.

Przypisane dyscypliny naukowe: Ekonomia i finanse (Dziedzina nauk społecznych); Nauki o zarządzaniu i jakości (Dziedzina nauk społecznych).

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Received: 14.10.2024. Revised: 13.11.2024. Accepted: 14.11.2024. Published: 15.11.2024.

Multimodal Discourse Interpretation of the Paris Olympics Mascot

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Abstract:

Background: This study aims to analyze the design intention of the mascot of the Paris Olympics from a multimodal perspective. As the host of the 2024 Olympic Games, Paris' mascot carries rich meanings. With globalization and technological advancement, information spreads multimodally, and multimodal discourse analysis is important to understand how the mascot interacts with different audiences, conveys meanings as well as bridges cultural differences, and spreads the Olympic spirit and cultural heritage of the host country.

Methods: Taking Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the theoretical basis, based on multimodal discourse analysis under the perspective of social semiotics, and combining with the analysis indexes in the multimodal image analysis software, the mascots of the Paris Olympic Games are visualized and interpreted to explore their image characteristics, design concepts and social significance.

Results: the mascot is analyzed from three aspects: reproduction meaning, composition meaning and interaction meaning. In terms of reproduction, the mascot is related to the Olympic Games and French culture; in terms of composition, the emblem and other elements are the core information carrier, and the color and other elements play an important role; in terms of interaction, the mascot has a variety of interactions with the viewers and so on.

Conclusion: Olympic mascots are important components of Olympic culture. The multimodal discourse analysis comprehensively and accurately interpreted the connotation of the mascot of the Paris Olympic Games, reflecting the information of the organizing country and integrating it with the Olympic movement, reflecting the spirit of sports. The study has deficiencies, and the mascots can be further explored in the real context.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis; Multimodal Discourse; Mascot; Paris Olympics

1. Introduction

The word “mascot” comes from the French word “masco” or “mascotte,” which translates to “witch (Daily, 2008)”. According to historian Richard Traubner, the word “mascot” came into being in 1880 when Edmond Audrain's opera *La Mascotte* became popular. Audrain's opera tells the story of a young woman who brings good luck to those around her. The opera was translated as “Mascotte,” and the concept of mascots bringing good luck was established. Yale University adopted its first sports mascot in 1889 (Daily, 2008). They now perform at all levels of sport. The history of Olympic mascots can be traced back to the 10th Winter Olympics in 1968, when a mascot named Schuss appeared, and the 1972 Munich Olympics mascot, Waldi, was named the first official mascot (Choi & Lee, 2022). Mascots have appeared at every Olympic Games since then. With the deepening development of the era of globalization and the information fragmentation development of modern communication media as well as the continuous expansion of the influence of the Olympic Games as an international famous brand, the Olympic mascot, as an important part of an Olympic Games, has its own unique status and role, and it is the mascot culture with significance of the Olympic culture, and one of the important elements constituting the image of the Olympic Games. Olympic mascot as a very vital and multicultural Olympic design elements, has an incomparable effect, but also is an important carrier to inherit the Olympic spirit and convey the concept of the Olympic Games. As a kind of symbol, the Olympic mascot is more of a materialized Olympic spirit and purpose, and another perfect embodiment of the Olympic core concept and core values. In today's era of frequent cross-cultural exchanges, the Olympic mascot, as a special symbol for information transmission in the era of big data, is silently and powerfully conveying to the world the host country's all-round interpretation of the Olympic Movement. The 33rd Paris Olympics will be held from July 26 to August 11, 2024, in Paris, France, which has been the capital of fashion and culture since ancient times, and the Olympics will attract a lot of attention, so it is worth paying attention to whether its mascot can be interpreted accurately and deeply!

2. Literature Review

2.1 Interpretation of the Paris Olympic Games mascot

The design of the Olympic mascot “Phryge” is inspired by the traditional French Phryge hat, which is of great significance in the history of France, it is the “Symbol of the pursuit of freedom” during the French Revolution, representing the French people's relentless pursuit of freedom and equality. the relentless pursuit of freedom and equality by the French people (Chiabaut, 2023). Nowadays, the shape of the Frigidaire hat worn by the goddess Mariana is widely seen in coins, stamps and sculptures and paintings in city halls all over France, which shows that it has been deeply integrated into the cultural lineage of France, and the Olympic Games mascot is modeled after it, which fully demonstrates France's profound historical and cultural heritage. The spirit of freedom represented by the Phrygian cap is highly compatible with the Olympic spirit (Chiabaut, 2023). The Olympic Games has always advocated the values of freedom, equality, hard work, etc. And “Phryge” will symbolize this freedom, which can vividly convey the spiritual connotation of the Olympic Games, and let people more intuitively feel the Olympic spirit and the integration of the French culture. The Press Kit describes the Olympic Phryge as “a brilliant tactician” who is one of the smartest in the crowd. A true mathematician, he never starts anything without thinking it through. With his organized mind and charisma, he will undoubtedly inspire everyone to get more exercise every day! And Paralympian Phryge has been described as “a real party animal (Chiabaut, 2023)”, Spontaneous and a bit hot-headed, it's not afraid of anything and it wants it all! Always ready for new experiences, he will bring everyone around him together with infectious energy and enthusiasm!



Figure1: Paris Olympics mascot

The Paralympic mascot “Phryge”, also based on the Frigidaire hat, further emphasizes the values of inclusion and equality advocated by the Paralympic Games since the inheritance of France's history, culture and spirit of freedom. It demonstrates to the world that France respects and supports athletes with disabilities and attaches great importance to the cause of sports for the disabled. Paralympian Phryge is described as having a warm personality and daring to try new things.

She enjoys all kinds of sports, whether it is racket sports, speed sports, team or individual sports, she is actively involved. This character trait reflects the positive and challenging spirit of Paralympic athletes and encourages more people with disabilities to participate in sports. She has taken it upon herself to spread the values of sport by cheering on athletes on every field of play and organizing parties to celebrate victories or overcome defeats. This reflects the fact that the Paralympics is not only an event for sports competition, but also a platform for conveying sportsmanship and promoting communication and unity. While retaining the basic design elements of the Olympic mascot, its right leg is equipped with a blade prosthesis. This unique design element not only reflects the characteristics of disabled athletes, but also becomes the iconic feature of the Paralympic mascot with a high degree of recognition.



Figure 2: Paris Paralympic mascot

2.2 Methods of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse is the phenomenon of using multiple senses such as auditory, visual, tactile, etc., to communicate through multiple means and symbolic resources such as language, image sound, movement, etc (Zhang, 2015). Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), on the other hand, is a systematic analysis of multiple semiotic modalities in human communicative activities (Kress & Bezemer, 2023). Since the publication of the landmark book on multimodal discourse analysis, *Reading Images: A Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020), related scholars have made more in-depth theoretical discussions and expanded practices based on the theory of Visual Grammar (Bateman, 2008; Royce, 2007; Tan, Smith, & O'Halloran, 2015). Especially in the visual analysis of graphic and video images, related scholars also have more research results on advertising images (Dash, Patnaik, & Suar, 2016) news discourse (Bi, 2019), political cartoons (Chow, 2023), magazine covers (Ferreira & Heberle, 2013), media posts (Ng, 2018), etc. The above numerous findings based on visual grammar theory provide a reference for this study, which can thus serve as a theoretical guide for this study. Visual grammar theory focuses on multimodal discourse analysis from a social semiotic perspective.

Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) argues that the three main meta functions of language (conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse) proposed by Halliday are not limited to language or writing, but apply equally to all modes of signification such as image, sound, color, and layout, and compares them to Halliday 's theory of the three main meta functions(Halliday & McDonald, 2004), It proposes a theoretical framework of visual grammar, i.e., a socio-semiotic approach to understanding visual communication, pointing out that visual symbols, such as images, can embody three kinds of meanings in social and cultural contexts: Representational Meaning, Interactive Meaning, and Compositional Meaning.

Synthesizing Kress and van Leeuwen in Reading Images: A Grammar of Visual Design (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) In the explanation of the above concepts, we draw a framework diagram of visual grammar theory (Fig. 3) to clarify the hierarchical relationship of the relevant concepts and use multimodal discourse analysis to analyze the image of the Paris Olympics mascot according to the analytical indexes against the framework diagram.

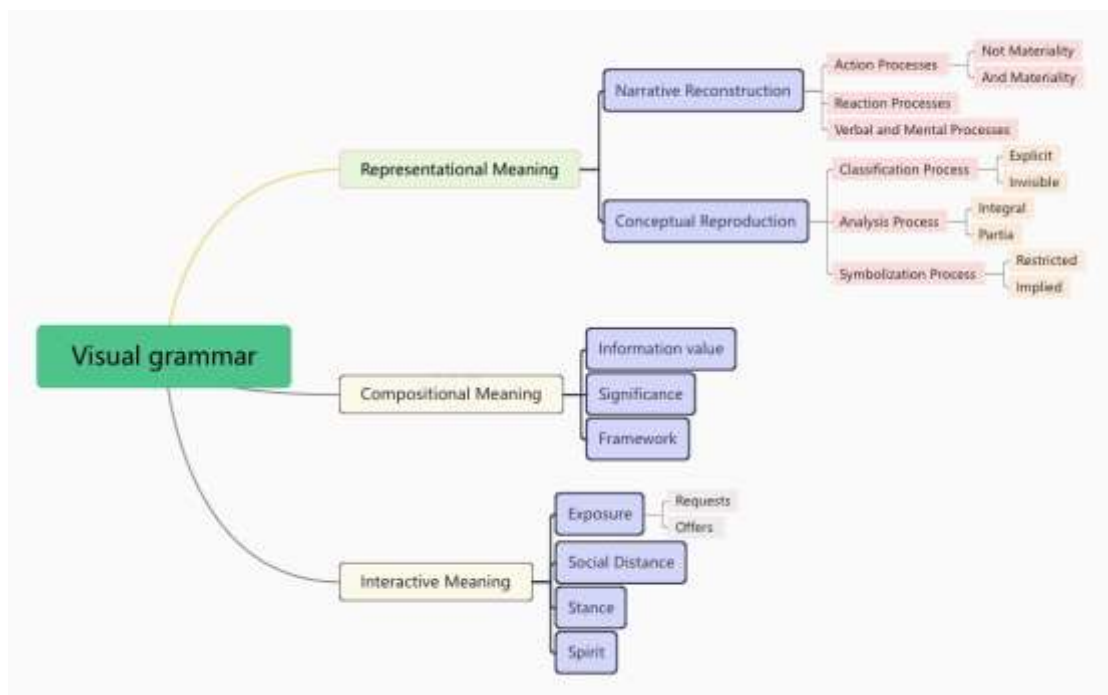


Figure.3: The grammar framework of visual—image analysis

3. Research Methods

This paper takes the visual grammar of Kress & Leeuwen as the theoretical basis, based on the multimodal discourse analysis under the perspective of social semiotics, combines the analysis indexes in the Multimodal Analysis Image developed by Kay O'Halloran's team to visualize and interpret the image of the mascot of the Paris Olympics and explores two questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the image of the mascot of the Paris Olympics?
- (2) What kind of design concept and social significance does the mascot image carry?

By objectively interpreting the characteristics, concepts and meanings of the mascot as a social symbol, we aim to help the design of mascot images for future exhibitions and further expand the multimodal discourse research on Olympic mascots.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of reproduction meaning

Reproduced meaning refers to the interaction and conceptual relationship between people, places and things in a visual symbol representation image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). The former reflects narrative reproduction and the latter reflects conceptual reproduction. Narrative reproduction mainly includes action process, reaction process, speech process and psychological process. Both the action process and the reaction process are divided into material and immaterial (Tian, 2018). It is closely related to the number of participants and the direction (vector) in which they are pointing, such as their movements and sight. Verbal and mental processes are expressed indirectly by means of projection. Conceptual reproduction consists of three processes: categorization, analysis, and symbolization. The categorization process embodies explicit and implicit forms of categorization in the form of superior-subordinate relations between two or more participants. The analytic process connects the participants in a whole-part structure, which generally includes two kinds of participants: one is a carrier (whole), and the other is an arbitrary number of attributes (parts) that represent the relationship between them (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). The process of symbolization is about the meaning or essence of the participants and is divided into symbolic restriction and symbolic implication. Symbolic restriction has two participants, one is the participant who represents meaning or identity and the other is the carrier, who establishes his or her own meaning or identity in relation to the other participant and whose meaning is given from outside. The process of symbolic implication has only one participant, the carrier, whose meaning and identity come from within, from the carrier's own qualities (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

In terms of the course of action, the design of the Paris Olympics mascot, Frigidaire, does not directly demonstrate a dynamic action directed towards other participants. However, if understood implicitly, as a symbol of the Games, it can be seen as “participating” in the action of the Games as a global sporting event. It creates an association with the athletes, spectators, and the overall Olympic environment that suggests its role as an inspiration, companion, and representative of the sporting event. For example, in the promotional activities for the Olympic Games, the mascot may be shown in energetic gestures such as “jumping” and “cheering”, which can be interpreted as a process of active participation and promotion of the Olympic Games. In terms of the reaction process, the design of the mascot does not clearly show a reaction to other objects. But extended on a conceptual level, it can be seen as a response to French culture and the Olympic spirit. With its unique image and design elements, it responds to the deep historical and cultural heritage of France as well as the spiritual values of freedom, equality and unity advocated by the Olympic Games. For example, its choice of colors and the prototype of the Phrygian cap are a response to and a reflection of French culture and history. Although the mascot itself has no verbal and psychological activities, it can be endowed with some verbal and psychological qualities from the perspective of projection.

For example, the mascot of the Olympic Games is set up as a shrewd strategist, which may project a mental process of thinking and planning as it faces the competition and challenges of the Games. It may “speak” words of encouragement and motivation to the athletes, such as “Come on, use your intelligence to win”. The Paralympic mascot, as an extroverted party girl, may project her positive, optimistic, encouraging and joy-spreading words and mental qualities, such as “Let's enjoy sports together, no matter how hard it is”. In the categorization process, the mascot of the Paris Olympics belongs to the category of cultural symbols of the Olympic Games, which is part of the many elements related to the Olympic Games, and together with the emblem of the Olympic Games and the torch, it constitutes the symbolic system of the Olympic Games. At the same time, it can also be categorized as a representative symbol of French culture, because it carries the historical and cultural elements of France, such as the French spirit of freedom represented by the Phrygian cap. This dual categorization reflects its position and role in different cultures and symbol systems. From the analysis process, the mascot is a carrier, and its individual design elements are its attribute parts. For example, its triangular shape, color scheme, and special prosthetic design (Paralympic mascot) are all part of its attributes. The triangular shape gives people a stable and unique feeling, reflecting an innovative and breakthrough design concept; the color matching is based on the French flag color, reflecting the French national characteristics and Olympic spirit; the prosthetic limb design highlights the concern for the disabled group, and all these attributes together constitute the overall concept of the mascot, which conveys a wealth of cultural connotations and values. The Paris Olympic mascot has two levels of symbolic limitations. On the one hand, as the mascot of the Olympic Games, its identity is limited by the general environment of the Olympic Games, and it must represent the spirit and values of the Olympic Games, such as the pursuit of excellence, solidarity and love. On the other hand, as a representative of French culture, it is constrained by French history and culture to embody the French spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity as well as the tradition of freedom symbolized by the Phrygian cap. For example, the Olympic emblem on its chest and the use of the colors of the French flag make clear its symbolic identity and limitations at these two levels. Some of the mascot's own design elements also function as symbolic allusions. For example, its large eyes may suggest a sense of curiosity, spirituality and concern for the world, which echoes the spirit of openness and inclusiveness promoted by the Olympic Games. The strategist image of the Olympic mascot implies that athletes need wisdom and strategy, and the party girl image of the Paralympic mascot implies that Paralympic athletes have a positive and optimistic attitude towards life and love for sports, all these image designs convey deeper cultural and spiritual connotations through symbolic implication.

4.2 Analysis of compositional meaning

Compositional significance is reflected by information value, salience, frame, and layout, graphic relationship and so on. The top and bottom, left and right, center and edges of an image convey different information values, respectively. Significance refers to the image elements through the foreground or background location, relative size, tonal value (or color) contrast, sharpness differences and other ways to attract the audience to varying degrees; the frame refers to the image with or without spatial division lines will be separated or connected to the image elements (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

In terms of information value, in terms of visual center of gravity, the Paris 2024 emblem prominently displayed on the mascot's chest, along with the corresponding Olympic (or Paralympic) logo, is the central information-carrying part of the composition. This highlights their important status as the official mascots of the Paris Olympics (Paralympics), focusing all the information about the Olympic Games and allowing viewers to recognize their association with the Games at the first time, while other visual elements such as colors and shapes are centered around this core information to assist in conveying the cultural values and French characteristics of the Games. In terms of framing, the triangular shape of "Frieze" is a unique way of framing. The stability of the triangle gives people a reliable and classic visual impression, and at the same time, it breaks the conventional mascot's round and lovely shape. This way of framing makes the mascot stand out among many visual images, attracting the audience's attention and guiding them to appreciate and interpret it from different angles. For the Paralympic mascot, its special prosthetic design creates a unique focus in the framing, highlighting the special perspective of concern for the disabled community. In terms of saliency, color plays a key role in saliency. Red, as the main color, is the most prominent visually and can quickly catch the viewers' eyes, making the mascot highly recognizable in various backgrounds. In addition, cute facial features such as big eyes are also highly salient elements, which increase the affinity and attractiveness of the mascot, making it easier for viewers to focus on the mascot and further explore the meaning behind it.

4.3 Analysis of Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning embodies a specific relationship between the participants (people, places and things depicted in the image) and the viewer, which is mainly constructed through the joint effects of (gaze) contact, (framing) social distance, (perspective) attitude and (color) mood. Contact refers to the interactive relationship between the participant and the viewer established through visual symbols such as vectors (gaze), facial expressions, gestures, and so on. When the participant gazes directly at the viewer, the viewer is asked to establish some kind of contact with the participant, which belongs to the soliciting category of images; when the participant does not have any contact with the viewer, but only provides some kind of information or when the viewer examines the object dispassionately, which belongs to the providing category of images (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Social distance suggests different social relationships between participants and viewers through the size of the frame in which the camera is framed and the choice between near, medium and far views. Perspective primarily reflects attitudinal meaning and power relations.

If the participant is looked down from a high place by the viewer, it means that the viewer has a high status and power; if the participant is looked up from a low place by the viewer of the image of the Chinese digital exhibition mascot in the multimodal field of view, it means that the participant has a high status and power; if the two sights are level, it is an equal relationship and there is no power difference. Mood, on the other hand, emphasizes the degree of truthfulness with which the image world reflects reality. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, mood is closely related to color saturation, discrimination, coordination, contextualization, reproduction, depth, illumination, and luminance (Dong, 2021).

In terms of contact, in the publicity and promotional activities of the Olympic Games, mascots play a role through actual contact interaction with spectators, athletes, volunteers and so on. For example, in the event site, the mascot hugs, takes photos, gives high fives and other behaviors with people, establishing a close physical contact relationship. This contact breaks the distance between people and people, and between people and the event, and allows people to integrate into the atmosphere of the Olympic Games and strengthens their sense of participation in the Olympic Games and their emotional connection. In terms of social distance, as a representative of the public image of the Olympic Games, “Frieze” brings the social distance between people of different countries and different cultural backgrounds closer. It appeared in front of the global audience with a friendly and lovely image, eliminating the strangeness and gap. Whether on the spot or through the media, people can feel the mascot's message of equality and tolerance, which promotes international cultural exchanges and mutual understanding, and makes the Olympic Games a global gathering across social distance. In terms of attitude, the mascot's positive, warm and friendly design attitude reflects the spirit of the Olympic Games in welcoming the participation of people from all over the world. It's cute image and cheerful setting convey a positive emotional attitude to the audience, encouraging people to pay attention to the Olympic Games, love sports and enjoy happiness and friendship in the process. At the same time, the respect and caring attitude towards the disabled group shown by the special design of the Paralympic mascot also leads the society to form a more tolerant and understanding value.

Compositional meaning organically intertwines the reproduction and interaction meanings to form a meaningful whole image. When analyzing compositional meaning, we should regard the multimodal discourse as a whole and discuss it with as many compatible terms as possible, to understand more deeply the specific relationship between the viewer and the participant through specific language, and thus maximize the meaning conveyed by the image.

5.Results and discussion

The above analysis shows that Phryge's reproduction, interaction, and composition complement each other, and together they convey the unique image characteristics, design concepts, and social significance of their respective exhibition mascots. In terms of reproduction meaning, although the mascot of the Paris Olympics “Phryge” does not directly show dynamic actions pointing to other participants, it can be regarded as participating in the Olympics, relating to athletes, spectators and the environment, and responding to the French culture and the Olympic spirit; in terms of categorization, it is a symbol of the Olympic Games culture as well as a representative symbol of the French culture; and in terms of analysis, the design process embodies the whole and the part.

Process embodies the design concept of whole and part; there are both symbolic restrictions and symbolic implication, and its design elements convey a variety of cultural and spiritual connotations. In terms of compositional significance, the Paris 2024 emblem and related symbols on the mascot's chest are the core; in terms of framing, the unique triangular shape and the prosthetic design of the Paralympic mascot stand out; in terms of prominence, the color and some facial features play key roles, all of which reflect its important identity as an Olympic Games mascot and convey cultural values and characteristics. In terms of interactive significance, the mascot breaks the sense of distance through actual contact with all kinds of people; in terms of social distance, it brings different groups of people closer; in terms of attitude, it reflects the spirit of the Olympic Games in welcoming participation as well as respect and care for the disabled groups and promotes cultural exchange and value guidance. Like traditional textual discourse, images have the form, structure, meaning and function of discourse (Wang, 2019). Phryge images convey the meaning carried by pictorial discourse in the form of a combination of visual elements such as words, pictures, and colors. Kress and van Leeuwen view images as social symbols (Wu, 2014), Creative shift from traditional “linguistic grammar” to “visual grammar”(Liu,2020). It provides a theoretical basis for image analysis. The use of visual grammar to analyze images is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of image discourse, deep exploration of the information conveyed by the image, and insight into the internal mechanism of the meaning produced by the image (Liu, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Through the results of the multimodal discourse analysis of the mascot of the Paris Olympic Games, it can be seen that the three core contents of the multimodal discourse analysis, namely, reproduction meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, comprehensively and accurately interpret the specific connotations of the mascot of the Paris Olympic Games, which is characterized by a certain degree of regionalism and ethnicity, and to a large extent, it reflects and conveys the information of the host country in terms of its history, culture, and social consciousness, and also has a very appropriate integration with the Olympic Movement. Olympic movement has a very appropriate integration, fully embodies the spirit of higher, faster, stronger self-challenge and the spirit of fairness, justice, equality and freedom of sports competition. Although this study promotes the research on the image of Olympic mascots, there are shortcomings such as analyzing only the mascots themselves, and subsequent studies can take questionnaire surveys and other forms to explore the acceptance of the mascot image in the field and other real-world social contexts and its integration with the Olympics, to deeply excavate the social significance of the Olympic mascots.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank all of the researchers who kindly provided us with the data necessary to complete this study.

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