

The Cognitive Image of Chinese Folk Cultural Activities Online - An Investigation of Village Basketball Association based on Semiotics of Media

Zhenghao Meng^{1*}

¹ Guizhou Minzu University, Huaxi District, Guiyang, China

Email Address

949980608@qq.com (Zhenghao Meng)

*Correspondence: 949980608@qq.com

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Abstract:

The Village Basketball Association (VBA) is a folk basketball tournament in Guizhou, China, which has gained immense popularity on the internet as a folk collective cultural activity. VBA showcases the folk's perceptions and preferences towards public culture in contemporary China. This study collected and organized relevant comments left by people on online media platforms, primarily represented by Zhihu. By mining and analyzing high-frequency words and semantic relationships within the comment texts, we analyzed cultural symbols metaphorically represented by VBA and delineated the online cognitive image of folk culture.

Keywords:

Semiotics of Media, Media Culture, Chinese Folk Culture, Cultural Image

1. Introduction

The Village Basketball Association (VBA) is a folk basketball tournament held in Guizhou, China, named by imitating the nomenclature of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) games. VBA does not involve professional competitive events, instead, it features recreational matches played by ordinary people with a passion for basketball during their leisure time. The game pursues the purity of sports, rejecting commercial sponsorship and the involvement of professional associations during the event. Participants are comprised of local residents from various professions in Guizhou. After the relevant information about the VBA was uploaded to the internet, it garnered significant attention and support from Chinese netizens. It is regarded favorably as an outstanding and typical form of Chinese folk cultural activity. Information about VBA rapidly spread across the internet, leading to an online image of grassroots cultural activity. By analyzing the circulation of VBA cultural symbols in the online space, we can outline the image perception of Chinese netizens regarding Chinese folk culture. This exploration can subsequently reveal their general cultural preferences.

2. Literature Review

The construction of a public cultural space relies on cultural activities involving the public's collective participation. The organization of these activities and rituals gradually consolidates normative consensus among the groups involved. Ultimately, cultural activities garner familiarity and recognition from the community and gradually integrate into everyday life. Modern cultural space is connected through networks and is based on the media, resulting in a distinctive panorama of postmodern digital cultural space. Roland Barthes pointed out that the significance of a symbol can reveal the underlying social and cultural trends [1]. With the infinite difference of symbols, the significance embedded in symbols gradually becomes clear. As Feyrouz Bouzida points out, "Semiology as a qualitative method applied in media research helps the researcher to discover the hidden meanings of the visual texts: films, adverts, posters... within the socio-cultural context, it means the analysis of media phenomenon as a system through the manifested signs whether verbal or non-verbal that can be studied as Barthes proposed in his approach according to the two levels of signification i-e denotation and connotation." [2] Symbols mutually refer to each other and converge into an independent meaning system which reveals the cultural values that underpin it. When any culture attempts to construct its own semantic field, it first needs to utilize new media as an intermediary. The Internet media constitutes a semantic field that surpasses any specific culture, deeply shaping online users' cultural behaviors and cognitive approaches. As a result, the process of cultural space formation was captured and observed by Internet media and condensed into sets of online cultural symbols. As Gaines Elliot said in the abstract, "The pervasiveness of mass media and our dependence on it in contemporary life suggest that special skills are necessary in order to understand the nature of media and its effects on the interpretation of issues and events that happen outside the scope of an individual's experience." [3]. Under the promotion of online media, these cultural symbols are constantly undergoing metonymy and generation, eventually converging into an overall image of offline cultural activities.

Friedrich Kittler indicated that although media technology itself lacks meaning, it serves as a focal point for the generation of meaning, which can inscribe culture and significance into the discourse network created by media technology [4]. In specific cultural contexts, the discourse network manifests itself as a mediated technologically generated semiotic framework. "The framework treats "semiotic technology" not merely as a "tool" that serve some pragmatic purpose but as an artefact that structures how people communicate and interact." [5] Online media employs various symbol forms to present information interaction and meaning transfer, which possesses a strongly hyper-symbolic and intertextual mode of inscription. By symbolizing and commensuring different media information, online media reshapes the semantic connections and signification structures of symbols through its mode of signification, thereby generating cultural representations in the online space. "Social Semiotics with its focus on the process of the creation of meaning and social norms through semiotic resources may offer a valid methodology to be exploited in this area of studies." [6]

3. Method

Zhihu is one of the largest online communities, in which questions are created, answered, edited, and organized by its users. On Zhihu, high-quality answers are appreciated by other users through Likes. Answers with a high number of Likes are recognized as "excellent answers" and are viewed by a larger number of users. To

some extent, detailed answers on the Zhihu can reflect the collective attitudes and distribution of opinions among Chinese internet users towards a particular issue. We collected answers on the Zhihu related to VBA, aiming to explore common cultural symbols. We searched the keyword VBA(“村 BA”) on Zhihu and found five relevant questions with a substantial number of answers. They are as follows: 1) The Guizhou VBA championship was awarded, with the team from Qiandongnan Prefecture winning the title, which raises the question of how to perceive the popularity of VBA and what insights can this phenomenon provide for the development of folk sports. 2) What do you think of the explosive popularity of VBA? What does this kind of basketball tournament bring to rural areas? 3) What do you think of the explosive popularity of VBA championship in Guizhou? Do you think it could be promoted nationwide? 4) What's your perspective on villages becoming famous for VBA expanding their basketball courts and commercial streets, all while preserving their authentic local character? How can the attention and popularity be better utilized to benefit these villages? 5) What do you think of the development of the folk competition VBA in Guizhou, with an on-site audience of over 20,000 and over ten million people watching the live broadcast through various online platforms? We collected user-shared answers to the five aforementioned questions and obtained a total of approximately 104,000 characters of answer texts. Further text cleaning was conducted to remove irrelevant content such as URL sharing, recommendations, etc. In order to better study the perspectives, emotional attitudes, and concepts related to VBA on Zhihu. Based on this, the present study can obtain the symbolic image of VBA as it is portrayed online. We can also examine VBA as an independent space and investigate its reshaping of the online space.

3.1. Word Frequency Analysis

After tokenization and word frequency analysis of the text, we can get the word frequency table (Table 1) of the key answers to the topic of VBA in the Zhihu platform. It can be seen that the top five most frequent words: VBA, competition, basketball, sports, and is. The result indicates that the exploration of the nature and concept of VBA is the center of the icon. VBA is a regional basketball tournament, which is an indisputable common knowledge. However, this common knowledge has become the most discussed part, indicating the significance of defining and positioning the image of VBA. The term “be” is an affirmative word with strong positive connotations, assisting us in understanding the level of the definition of VBA in the text. By analyzing the adjacent words to the term “be”, we can obtain the frequency table of the left adjacent words (Table 2) and the frequency table of the right adjacent words (Table 3) of “is” in the text sentence. It has been observed that the referent nouns surrounding “be” are highly overlapping with core concepts such as “sports,” “basketball,” and “competition,” while other referent nouns are concentrated around qualitative concepts like “need”, “people”, and “public”. From this, it can be deduced that comments regarding VBA predominantly focus on its concepts and nature. The imagery and value of VBA in daily life and local context represent the most active part of the symbolic flow and capture the greatest attention. Moreover, the direction of this imagery and value references is closely related to people's demands and collective activities.

Table 1. High-frequency words in key responses to VBA on Zhihu.

Words	Number of occurrences	Number of responses	Frequency	TF-IDF
VBA	517	158	0.02	0.008
compete & competition	356	127	0.014	0.007
basketball	296	109	0.011	0.006
sport	262	97	0.010	0.006
be	236	118	0.009	0.005
don't have	211	105	0.008	0.005
event	208	76	0.008	0.006
develop & development	186	87	0.007	0.005
village	178	63	0.007	0.005
Guizhou	156	77	0.006	0.004
public	154	70	0.006	0.004
activity & act	153	71	0.006	0.004
China	141	65	0.005	0.004
promote	140	76	0.005	0.004
folk	133	60	0.005	0.004
organize	104	63	0.004	0.003
countryside	103	53	0.004	0.003
everyone	101	58	0.004	0.003
local	99	58	0.004	0.003
player	99	41	0.004	0.004
participate	97	64	0.004	0.003

Table 2. High-frequency left adjacent words of “be”.

Left adjacent words	Number of occurrences
VBA	7
actually	5
probably	4
demands	4
basketball	3
competition	3
benefits	3

Table 3. High-frequency right adjacent words of “be”.

Right adjacent words	Number of occurrences
sport	9
VBA	6
basketball	4
down-to-earth	4
people	4
public	3
China	3

3.2. Metaphorical Relationship Analysis

After identifying the central areas of interest concerning the VBA, the analysis of semantic metaphorical relationships can further elucidate how this attention is interconnected with the topics of concern. The results of metaphorical relationship analysis reveal that the core of the metaphorical relationship graph is formed by rural sports events and public basketball, while the periphery of the graph initiates the flow of signification reference and the generation of meaning. By analyzing the signification reference and connections of the terms on the periphery, we can discover underlying meanings within the text [5]. Specifically, the signification flows from the VBA in two directions: firstly, towards mass cultural activities. VBA represents a dynamic and engaging mass cultural activity that satisfies the desire for participation in the cultural realm and the expectations for a public cultural space. The principal contradiction in Chinese society lies between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. VBA is a folk activity, which satisfies the diverse expectations for rural culture and mass sports events. It serves as a successful case and representative example of meeting people's increasing needs. Therefore, accolades for VBA naturally revolve around the promotion of public cultural activities. In the eyes of netizens, VBA epitomizes an objective environment and atmosphere space capable of fulfilling cultural and entertainment desires. Secondly, towards the assessment of sports development in China. Text related to Chinese sports includes networks involving terms like "basketball," "football," "players," "sports," and "level" that demonstrate the public's concern for the sports industry. Notably, although VBA is a basketball competition, there is a close semantic connection with football. The connecting point lies in the values of mass participation and collective sports. Both Chinese football and basketball have performed relatively poorly in international competitions. Therefore, to most people, grassroots talent development and sports talent cultivation have become the first path to revitalize Chinese football and basketball. Consequently, VBA has become a sports event that aligns with public expectations, emphasizes public participation, and focuses on the sport itself, which naturally enjoys popularity among the public. This reflects that participation and purity are always the main sources of mass vitality. While connecting with mass sports, VBA also constructs a collective imagination among the public to build a sporting powerhouse by developing grassroots activities.

4. Discussion

The internal connections among cultural symbols of VBA reflect the collective preference and value alignment of Chinese netizens towards folk cultural activities [6]. Various value appeals and cultural identities are abundantly expressed in comments about VBA, constructing multiple cognitive images of VBA across aspects of life, hometown, and culture. The flow of these symbols behind images portrays the evolving trends in modern Chinese folk culture.

4.1. Artistic Lifestyle Imagery

Max Weber pointed out that modern Western rationality analyses human beings "in terms of concepts of interests, values, a need for meaning and a potential for rational calculation", and that the individual is thus framed in "a specific model of the actor as a human individual" [7]. Modernity is thus transformed into instrumentalization, rationalization and homogenization. In this context, individual life, which cannot be integrated into a unified way of life, and culture, which cannot be subsumed into rational values, become alien and marginal elements in the process of modernisation.

Having an artistic lifestyle often remains an aspiration for many in contemporary society, as this fantasy is challenging to attain under the wave of commercialized living. "Perceptible in everyday life, of the total ambiguity of Affluence and Consumption: they are always lived as myth (the assumption of happiness beyond history and morality) and endured as an objective process of adaptation to a new type of collective behavior." [8]. Daily life is increasingly ensnared and consumed by the mythical spaces created by the logic of commodities, making it more difficult for individuals to access an artistic daily life. Transforming daily life into an aesthetic and artistic experience has long been a crucial means of meeting the needs of the public and a significant direction of the Chinese path to modernization. Extracting the aesthetics of life by symbols becomes an important goal in constructing public spaces.

VBA incorporates everyday life items into competitions, infusing ordinary daily objects with special ritual significance and cultural value, thereby symbolizing these everyday items. These everyday objects allow everyone to participate in the understanding and transmission of symbols, enabling the audience to engage in discussions about the competition at any time. Regarding venue layout, seating arrangements, and event operations, the organizers decided to place plastic benches on the field instead of uniform seating arrangements, replacing professional cheerleading squads with folk dances, and favoring simplicity and convenience over a standardized, formal aesthetic. This approach not only reduces the operational costs of the event but also lowers the barrier to entry for the general public. Without tickets and elaborate ceremonies, the competition space is filled with accessible everyday life and cultural symbols that can be easily understood. These comprehensible cultural symbols empower the audience to become participants in the event and narrators of the competition's discourse. VBA is an extension of everyday life rather than a ceremonial exhibition. Daily symbols in VBA acquire meaning and expression, gaining aesthetics through competition. The aesthetic value of VBA cultural symbols is not manifested in grand ceremonies but in their ability to smoothly integrate into the daily lives and conversations of the masses. VBA shows the tolerance and purity of the residents of Guizhou's small towns. These pure and tolerant cultural values, evident in everyday life, finally find their way into the collective cultural space created by VBA.

4.2. Mediated Rural Imagery

Media has gradually become a significant force in social development, and media logic has increasingly become the prevailing social logic. Symbols require mediation to reach receivers and complete their process of conveying meaning. Under the intermediary role of media, the mechanisms of symbol reference are also structurally influenced by the media. VBA is a cultural event for local residents in Guizhou, which has garnered long-term attention from national media and the public. This demonstrates the role of the media's meaning-enhancing mechanism in the dissemination of VBA cultural symbols.

Nöth W argues that in the context of postmodern culture, media has entered a stage of self-reference. In this stage, media does not merely serve as an intermediary for conveying information in the process of signification but, rather, structurally reshapes the signifying relationships, enabling symbols to reflectively point to the media itself [9]. And media demonstrates its pivotal role by extracting and connecting various cultural symbols and constructing new signifying relationships and semiotic spaces. This reflexivity reference drives cultural symbols into media narratives, making media

self-reference an unavoidable fact that must be confronted in the dissemination of cultural symbols. If we can better harness the tendency toward self-reference, we can facilitate the continuous integration of cultural symbols into various narrative contexts, enhancing their cultural influence. For instance, most of the rural symbols in VBA are primarily contextualized within Guizhou, making it challenging for users outside of this region to understand and engage in discussions. However, the media's self-reference can drive rural symbols into the media culture context, expanding the interpretational space for these rural symbols. Media plays a crucial driving role in pushing rural symbols from behind the scenes to the forefront, transitioning them from small-town stories into the public eye. The narrative discourse of media's self-reference continuously absorbs suitable symbols into the online space, reconfiguring the rural symbols of VBA within the narrative logic of media. And the human touch conveyed by rural symbols continues to evoke a sense of belonging among the residents.

4.3. Gamified Cultural Imagery

Huizinga J. pointed out that culture is generated in the form of games, according to him, "In all its higher forms the latter (human play) at any rate always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual-the sacred sphere." [10] VBA is a confrontational game similar to street basketball and professional basketball. The game rules emphasize pursuing victory, which turns the competition into a ritualistic activity. Victory bestows a sense of superiority on the winner. Winning the game serves as evidence of superiority, which becomes material used by victors to construct and express their image. As a result, when the victors attribute their success to certain attributes, those who possess the same attributes also share in the glory, gaining positive material for self-affirmation and self-image construction. Therefore, the game possesses a unique characteristic: the joy of victory always extends from the competitors to their supporters. Games have the ability to create shared emotions and identity, extending this emotional identification into the collective. The simple spectator seats are jammed with people, holding their plastic benches, food, and umbrellas. This local team evoked emotional resonance and a sense of identity among the people. In the process of formalizing the game, the game has become a cultural ritual, and the victory and its associated ceremony have become cultural symbols shared by the community.

5. Conclusions

The grassroots sports events organized in Guizhou, exemplified by VBA, exhibit characteristics of accessibility, purity, and non-commercial nature. These characteristics attract the active participation of many local residents and gain significant attention in the online space. During the time when VBA was held, this event drew the interest of the Chinese Basketball Association and was widely reported by the mainstream media. The cultural symbols presented in VBA reflect the public's perception of Chinese grassroots cultural activities. Notably the artistry and medium have deeply permeated the contemporary Chinese internet users' understanding of grassroots culture, influencing their daily lives and perceptions of local identity. Simultaneously, these cultural cognitions are influenced by postmodern media culture, enveloped in a gamified and relaxed atmosphere.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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