



From Symbols to Strategy: The Role of Mascot Design in Sports Management and Cultural Communication

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Abstract

This study explores the symbolic role of mascot and visual identity design in major sporting events, focusing on their cultural expression and management value. By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates product design and sports management, the paper analyzes how symbolic elements such as colors, shapes, and cultural motifs enable audiences to associate visual designs directly with specific sports disciplines. Using Olympic mascots as key case studies, the research demonstrates that symbolic design not only functions as a visual identifier but also as a critical resource in event management, enhancing cultural dissemination, brand communication, commercial development, and social engagement. The findings suggest that future sporting events should integrate digital technologies and sustainable design principles to strengthen the role of symbolic design in promoting global sports culture. This study compares four Olympic mascot cases [1] to link symbolism with management outcomes. We argue that integrating digital technology and sustainability will further amplify mascots' strategic value in future mega-events.

Subject Areas

Sports Science

Keywords

Sports Management, Product Design, Symbolism, Olympic Mascots, Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

Mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games are no longer limited to being

platforms for athletic competition; they also serve as stages for national image-building, cultural diplomacy, and global branding [2]. Within this context, mascots and visual identity systems have become powerful tools of communication, allowing organizers to engage diverse audiences across linguistic and cultural barriers.

Mascots, as symbolic representations of the event, carry meanings that extend beyond aesthetics. They embody cultural values, represent host nations, and facilitate audience recognition of specific sports or themes. For example, the blue-colored “Beibei” from the Beijing 2008 Olympic mascots symbolized water sports, while the futuristic design of London 2012’s “Wenlock” highlighted technological innovation and youth engagement. These cases illustrate that symbolic design can be a strategic resource in sports management, linking design with branding, commercialization, and public participation [2].

However, existing sports management research has primarily focused on event organization, marketing strategies, or resource allocation [3], with relatively little attention to the intersection of symbolic product design and event management. This paper therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining how symbolic design contributes to both cultural communication and managerial outcomes in global sporting events.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

2.1. Symbolic Design Theory

Symbolism plays a central role in communication, where signs and symbols convey meaning beyond their physical form [3]. In the context of sports, design elements such as color, shape, and animal figures serve as semiotic codes that create immediate associations with specific disciplines or cultural narratives. This theoretical perspective allows us to understand how audiences can “read” a mascot and connect it to a sport or cultural value.

2.2. Sports Management Theory

Sports management provides the framework for analyzing how symbolic design supports branding, marketing, and stakeholder engagement in sporting events. Mascots and visual identities are not merely aesthetic products; they are managed assets that contribute to revenue generation, spectator engagement, and legacy-building [4]. Integrating symbolic design into sports management expands our understanding of how events cultivate recognition and loyalty.

2.3. Research Methods

This paper employs a qualitative research design combining literature review and case study analysis. The literature review synthesizes insights from product design, semiotics, and sports management. Case studies focus on four Olympic mascots: Beijing 2008, London 2012, Tokyo 2020, and Paris 2024. Data are drawn from official Olympic reports, academic publications, and media analyses. A the-

matic analysis approach is applied to identify recurring patterns in symbolic design and their managerial implications, ensuring both depth and cross-case comparison.

In addition, this study adopts a comparative framework to evaluate the similarities and differences across the four cases. By systematically contrasting cultural expression, design symbolism, and management outcomes, the research highlights both universal patterns and context-specific adaptations. To enhance validity, triangulation is used by cross-referencing academic literature, IOC marketing reports, and media coverage. Furthermore, the study considers audience reception by incorporating secondary survey data and media commentary on mascot popularity. This multidimensional approach ensures that the findings capture not only the design intentions of organizers but also the practical impact on event management, branding, and social engagement.

Our corpus included X IOC/LOC documents, Y peer-reviewed articles, and Z professional/media pieces [spanning 2007-2024]; we initially employed open coding to identify categories [color, form, cultural motif, communication, commercial, social] before conducting axial coding to connect themes across cases—with disagreements resolved through discussion and a concise codebook to ensure consistency.

3. Case Analysis: Symbolism in Olympic Mascot Design

3.1 Beijing 2008: The “Fuwa”

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games introduced five mascots collectively known as the “Fuwa.” Each character embodied both a natural element and a specific sport. For example, “Beibei,” represented in blue, was associated with water and aquatic sports, while “Huanhuan” symbolized fire and the Olympic flame, reflecting passion and competitive events. The mascots also integrated traditional Chinese artistic motifs, such as fish and panda imagery, linking sports with national cultural identity. Through color coding and symbolic associations, the Fuwa exemplified how design can help audiences directly connect mascots with particular sports disciplines.

3.2. London 2012: “Wenlock”

The London 2012 mascot “Wenlock” marked a departure from traditional anthropomorphic mascots. With its futuristic metallic appearance and single “camera eye,” Wenlock symbolized modern technology and youth engagement. The design emphasized innovation, digital interaction, and inclusivity, aligning with London’s branding strategy as a vibrant, forward-looking city. While criticized by some for its unconventional design, Wenlock demonstrated how symbolic abstraction can strengthen youth-oriented communication and digital marketing campaigns.

3.3. Tokyo 2020: “Miraitowa”

Tokyo’s “Miraitowa,” combining the words “future” [mirai] and “eternity” [towa],

embodied the values of innovation and sustainability. Its design featured the blue-and-white ichimatsu pattern, a traditional Japanese checkered motif, symbolizing harmony between past and future. The mascot was widely integrated into augmented reality applications, expanding audience interaction and offering a new model for digital engagement. Miraitowa illustrated how symbolic design can merge traditional culture with advanced technology to enhance global recognition.

3.4. Paris 2024: “The Phryges”

In terms of symbolism and form, the design adopts stylized figures derived from the Phrygian cap, incorporating bold red tones and minimalist geometry to enhance recognize ability; culturally, it extends the cap’s symbolic connotations of liberty and civic spirit to encompass participation and inclusivity. For communication and technology, the strategy emphasizes short-form videos, digital stickers/filters, and educational kits to boost share ability and youth engagement, while sustainability and legacy aspects involve integrating responsible production practices and values-aligned programs. From a management perspective, the design offers high recall value and merchandising potential, with cross-cultural unfamiliarity to be mitigated via concise explainers across all touch points (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Cross-case summary of design symbolism and management outcomes.

Games & Mascot	Core design elements	Cultural references	Management outcomes (qual.)
Beijing 2008—Fuwa	Five-color palette; rounded forms	Lucky animals, traditional patterns	High recognition; strong merchandising; youth outreach
London 2012—Wenlock & Mandeville	Metallic/“single eye”; angular lines	Industrial heritage, host-city narrative	Mixed public reception; effective digital storytelling
Tokyo 2020—Miraitowa & Someity	Indigo ichimatsu checks; clean geometry	Tradition + future fusion	Resilient licensing; wide digital asset use
Paris 2024—The Phryges	Red Phrygian-cap silhouette	Liberty, civic spirit	High recall; education programs; manage cross-cultural clarity

Note: Outcomes are qualitative syntheses from available public sources.

4. The Management Value of Symbolic Design

4.1. Cultural Value

Mascots provide a cultural narrative that enhances the symbolic capital of sporting events. They embody national traditions, historical legacies, and societal values, transforming sports competitions into cultural spectacles [5].

Moreover, mascots allow host nations to showcase cultural soft power by embedding local myths, folklore, and heritage into global events. For instance, Beijing’s “Fuwa” integrated Chinese artistic motifs such as fish, pandas, and fire, while Paris’s “Phryges” drew on revolutionary symbolism to reinforce French

identity. In this way, mascots extend beyond aesthetics, acting as cultural ambassadors that project the host country's values to international audiences.

4.2. Communicative Value

Through simplified symbolic forms, mascots transcend language barriers and ensure global audience recognition. They are effective vehicles for mass communication, particularly in the era of digital and social media [6].

Their symbolic clarity facilitates instant recognition during broadcasting, merchandise, and promotional campaigns, making them accessible to audiences regardless of linguistic background. In addition, mascots have become prominent tools for interactive communication on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, where short animations and memes featuring mascots can rapidly go viral. This communicative dimension is essential in attracting younger generations who engage with sports primarily through digital media.

4.3. Commercial Value

Mascots serve as key assets in merchandising strategies. Their recognizable forms enable the creation of toys, apparel, and souvenirs, generating substantial revenue streams for organizing committees. For instance, Beijing 2008 and London 2012 mascots collectively generated hundreds of millions of dollars in licensing income [6].

Beyond direct merchandising, mascots are integrated into sponsorship activations and brand partnerships. Companies often co-brand with mascots to align their products with the spirit of the Games, creating cross-promotional opportunities. The mascot thus becomes a commercial mediator, linking the organizing committee, sponsors, and consumers. Additionally, digital products such as NFTs [non-fungible tokens] of mascots are emerging as new revenue channels, reflecting the expansion of mascot commercialization in the digital economy.

4.4. Social Value

Mascots strengthen public engagement and promote inclusivity. They are especially effective in appealing to children and young audiences, thereby fostering long-term sports participation and fandom. By embodying accessible and friendly symbols, mascots create emotional bonds between events and their audiences.

Furthermore, mascots can support social campaigns by embodying values such as diversity, sustainability, and accessibility. For example, Tokyo's "Miraitowa" was integrated into campaigns promoting inclusivity and technological innovation, while Paris's "Phryges" highlight environmental sustainability. In educational contexts, mascots are used in schools to promote Olympic values such as friendship and respect, making them tools for social learning as well as entertainment. Thus, mascots not only generate enthusiasm for a single event but also contribute to shaping social attitudes and cultural legacies.

5. Discussion

The case studies illustrate that symbolic design in sports events is not merely decorative but serves as an integral component of event management. From a product design perspective, mascots use color, form, and cultural references to create recognizable identities. From a sports management perspective, these symbols become strategic tools for branding, marketing, and community engagement.

Three key insights emerge:

1) **Integration of Symbolism and Management:** Mascots link the creative domain of design with the operational domain of management, making them hybrid tools that serve both aesthetic and managerial functions.

2) **Challenges of Cross-Cultural Communication:** While mascots carry national cultural meaning, their symbolic codes may not always be universally understood. Striking a balance between local specificity and global legibility remains a challenge.

3) **The Future of Symbolic Design:** Digital technologies such as AR/VR, virtual mascots, and online gamification will likely redefine how mascots operate in global sporting events. Additionally, sustainability imperatives will demand eco-conscious design strategies that combine environmental responsibility with cultural representation.

4) **In sum,** symbolic design offers both opportunities and challenges. It expands the scope of sports management by providing new pathways for cultural communication, economic development, and social engagement, while requiring careful attention to intercultural interpretation and ethical considerations.

6. Conclusions and Future Directions

This paper shows that Olympic mascots are not mere ornaments but strategic cultural and managerial assets. Across Beijing 2008, London 2012, Tokyo 2020, and Paris 2024, color, form, and culturally grounded motifs translate into brand recognition, communicative reach, commercial value, and social engagement.

Culturally, mascots distill historical symbols and local values into legible icons; communicatively, they offer cross-lingual cues that travel easily across media; economically, they anchor licensing and merchandising; socially, they mobilize youth and community participation, nurturing long-term affinity for sport.

Yet challenges remain: cross-cultural decoding can falter, the line between commercialization and authenticity is thin, and rapid digitization demands new playbooks for interactive and virtual settings.

Limitations Findings derive from qualitative, secondary-source analysis of Olympic cases, which may introduce subjectivity and constrain generalizability beyond the Games. Outcome indicators are synthesized qualitatively given uneven public data, limiting causal claims.

Future directions. Priorities include triangulating with sales and platform analytics, experimental and cross-cultural user tests of symbolism, and evaluating AR/UGC activations and sustainability-linked design to convert symbolic appeal

into measurable impact.

Looking forward, three directions merit attention. First, digital innovation will play a pivotal role, with virtual mascots, augmented reality, and interactive media expanding the symbolic function of mascots beyond physical merchandise. Second, sustainability will increasingly shape design, requiring environmentally responsible production and symbolism that reflects ecological values. Third, cross-cultural adaptability must be prioritized, ensuring that mascots simultaneously express local heritage and maintain global legibility.

In conclusion, symbolic design is not peripheral but central to the management of sporting events. By bridging the disciplines of product design and sports management, mascots exemplify how symbolic forms can create cultural resonance, enhance event branding, and generate long-term value. Future research should continue to explore how symbolism can be strategically leveraged to strengthen the cultural and managerial legacy of global sporting events.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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