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# Online Chinese discussions about the 2014 World Cup

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore online discussions about the 2014 World Cup on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo. Because China did not qualify for the World Cup, the study focusses on the role of online discussions surrounding a worldwide international event from an outsider perspective. Doing so will uncover not only the depth of dialogue surrounding issues of nation and sport, but – perhaps more importantly – also aid in uncovering the utility of online platforms in creating online communities even among presumed outsiders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A content analysis of the discussions on Sina Weibo is used to identify differences between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the focus of the content and the degree of valence.

**Findings** – Overall, fans were more likely than non-fans to use positive valence in their comments to enhance the value of the World Cup. Moreover, fans were also more likely to discuss topics closely related to the event itself, such as teams, athletes, and factual information/news about the World Cup, establishing identification with in-group participants. Moreover, the findings also imply important insight regarding electronic commerce opportunities.

**Originality/value** – This paper is among the first to investigate the online discussions about World Cup in China. Theoretically, this paper provides a comprehensive framework to examine the online discussions of mega-sporting events in China based on theories of social identity theory and nationalism. Practically, it provides baseline data for the sports industry and public relation practitioners to promote a sports event when the direct nationalistic interests are absent. Moreover, it also aids in uncovering the substantial changes in sports-related communication, experiences, and mediated participation.

**Keywords** China, Social media, Social identity, Sports, 2014 World Cup

**Paper type** Research paper

Chinese interest in the World Cup is never undermined by the fact that the Chinese national team rarely qualifies to compete in it (securing a spot only in 2002). In 2014, the FIFA World Cup surpassed the ratings of the previous World Cup by 26 percent, garnering more than 790 million viewers watching the games and other programs associated with the event (Chinese Central Television (CCTV), 2014). Beyond the direct telecast of the World Cup, online platforms consistently drew millions more viewers in streaming platforms, with five million, for instance, watching the opening game between Brazil and Mexico (CCTV, 2014). Even with all games airing after midnight, Chinese viewers exhibited exuberant interest and devotion to this international sporting event.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between nationalism and international sporting events, as these events are frequently considered to pervade home-nation interests (Min and Zhen, 2010; Zaharopoulos, 2007). However, this was obviously not the case in China with the mediation of the 2014 World Cup; beyond the high ratings and intense media coverage, Chinese enthusiasm about the World Cup went far beyond simply watching the event. The growth of audience ratings and media

coverage in different media channels triggered broad and intense public discussions which were not only an integral part of the whole narrative of the World Cup as presented in China, but also potentially reflect audience perceptions and attitudes about the event and other associated topics.

To ascertain the extent of Chinese interest in the World Cup, television is the predominant medium; however, to determine why such avidity persists (in the absence of a direct national team in which to cheer) and how these discussions evolved, the web-based – and predominantly social-platforms are the most crucial to explore. Some of the most seminal Chinese public discussions occurred in Sina Weibo, the largest microblogging website in China (Liu *et al.*, 2012) with over 500 million accounts and more than 46 million daily active users (Xinhua Net, 2013). During the 2014 World Cup, over 200 million comments were posted on Sina Weibo discussing the event (Li, 2014). Given its popularity and the richness of discussions produced, Sina Weibo is a suitable source to provide insight on the types of comments utilized with online discussions from a sporting outsiders' perspective. Doing so will uncover not only the depth of dialogue surrounding issues of nation and sport, but – perhaps more importantly – also aid in uncovering how online interest and discussion can manifest even among presumed outsiders in an online environment. In sum, exploring how China used Sina Weibo to discuss an event in which they were not a qualifier can have implications for exploring how other groups with desired – yet unfulfilled – associations with major entities creates a sense of kinship with that mega event in an online environment.

## Literature review
### Sports fans and social media
Social identity theory (SIT) posits that social identity derives from the knowledge that an individual inherently feels belonging within give social categories (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Stets and Burke, 2000). In an era of new communication technologies, online identity becomes integral to a person's self-presentation and social identity (Walther *et al.*, 2008) as, within that online environment, people actively construct and recreate their identities (Tambyah, 1996). Thus, social media becomes a pivotal online platform for boosting the construction of the actual and the "hoped-for-selves" (Yurchisin *et al.*, 2005, p. 737).

Social media refers to a set of online tools and social networking applications supporting social interactions in an online environment (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). As interactions on social media are not restricted to temporal and geographic limitations (Lee and Goh, 2013), social media has fostered substantial changes to communication between fans and sports (Hoeber *et al.*, 2016).

On the micro level, social media empowers sports fans to participate in public discussion, facilitating a more engaged experience for contemporary media audiences (Vann, 2014). On the macro level, as local supporters and global audiences coexist, social media contributes to an internationalized virtual community for sports fans (Lopez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2014). More specifically, online sports communities create an interactive social space, yielding enactment of social identity and formation of sport fan culture (Norman, 2014). Moreover, social media facilitates enhanced connections among sports fans and the promotion of group identification therein (Sanderson, 2013).

In the USA, Twitter provides sports fans a unique opportunity to discuss sports online (Vann, 2014); the highest social media peaks online are often attributable to

reactions to live sporting events (Highfield *et al.*, 2013). Serving as an extension to the formally mediated narrative delivered by the television screen (Wood and Baughman, 2012; Harrington *et al.*, 2012), social media increases efficacy to cope with problems via writing and expressing feelings with kindred spirits (Liu *et al.*, 2007; Nardi *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, the user-generated content on Twitter makes it an important information source pertaining to public opinion and online interactions (Hoeber *et al.*, 2016).

In China, Sina Weibo possesses similar features and functions as Twitter, connecting sports fans and forming fan communities in a microblogging platform. Marginalized groups value the importance of building communities (Somolu, 2007), making Sina Weibo an ideal vehicle for analysis as, unlike the Olympics, China was not a major figure on the stage of the World Cup. Thus, the use of social media could enable Chinese sports fans to engage as an in-group within the World Cup, rather than being relegated to out-group status. Chinese social media can potentially serve as a useful tool in providing insights about Chinese people's perceptions and attitudes about the World Cup – and specifically what it is like to be a participant in social media when active participation and fan identification with a national team is not attainable.

### Sports fans and the World Cup in China

As social identity is bound within social contexts, it is essential to such constructs into consideration (Turner *et al.* 1994). One major social context triggering an accentuation of social identity resides in sport, especially in international sports events (Billings *et al.*, 2013; Angelini and Billings, 2010). In international mega-sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup, self-categorization based on nationality or "home country" is a prevalent tendency on a global scale (Billings *et al.*, 2011; Anderson, 1991; Real, 1989). Such self-categorization could lead to enhanced perceptions of nationalized qualities, triggering the belief that one's home nation is superior to all other nations in a variety of manners (Billings *et al.*, 2013).

However, China only made its debut in the World Cup in 2002 and that is the singular time for China play even a relatively primary role in the history of the event. In the absence of such convenient identification and interests in the mediated narrative and the event itself, the specific aspects of the World Cup drawing Chinese people's attention and interests remained unknown. While explicit discussions about motivations for discussing the World Cup may be identified, the concept of fanship holds promise for better understanding of the phenomenon. In the context of sports, fanship is embedded with an individual's devoted interests and connection to athletes, sport teams, etc. (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010). Consequently, expressions of fanship are integral to discussions about the World Cup. In addition, as fanship is also closely tied with an individual's psychological and affective constructs (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010), expressions of fanship may influence the content and the focus of the discussion. Thus, to explore the general content – as well as the reasons why Chinese people were interested in an international event in which they traditionally do not qualify to take part – four research questions are proposed:

*RQ1.* Which kinds of fanship associated with the World Cup are most frequently expressed on Sina Weibo?

*RQ2.* What are major topics were covered in the discussion about World Cup 2014 on Sina Weibo?

*RQ3.* Will differences emerge between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the topics discussed?

*RQ4.* What are the most prominent reasons people provided as motivations to participate in Sina Weibo discussions?

Previous work shows that nationalism and team identification shapes the affective and substantive attributes of sports-related online commentaries (e.g. Billings *et al.*, 2015). Consistent with SIT, sports fans focus more on the attributions of success of their home-nation teams (Billings *et al.*, 2015. Moreover, distinctive focus were identified between commentaries about in-group teams/athletes and out-group teams/athletes (Billings *et al.*, 2015). For instance, compared to commentaries about adversaries, physicality and personality were more likely to be emphasized in commentaries about the athletes and teams that sports fans support (Billings *et al.*, 2015). However, as China did not have a national team playing in the 2014 World Cup, there could be a more diverse focus in the online comments about athletes and teams. Thus, another two research questions are proposed:

*RQ5.* What specific aspects of team-related comments are discussed most frequently on Sina Weibo?

*RQ6.* What specific aspects of athlete-related comments are discussed most frequently on Sina Weibo?

According to SIT, the process of social comparison influences people's attitudes towards different groups based on the assimilation and the distinction between self and others (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). For instance, out-group members are judged more negatively than in-group members (Hogg and Abrams, 1988) and sports fans, in particular, employ downward evaluation and negative attitudes toward the adversaries of their home-nation teams (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). In contrast, upward contacts are more prevalent in sports' fans comments about their home-nation team with which they identify (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). Similarly, analyzing Twitter commentaries about the 2014 World Cup, Billings *et al.* (2015) reported that the attributes of success were found to be more prevalent than that of failure in the commentaries about the home nation.

In the specific Chinese context, there obviously were no adversaries playing against the national team. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that media portrayed teams and athletes in a relatively neutral manner. However, the absence of the home country and the absence of the promotion of nationalism in the media could potentially trigger other emotions and new topics in the discussions on Sina Weibo. An examination of the valence used in the comments cannot only reveal people's attitudes, but also reflect the tendency of people's self-identification. Thus, five additional research questions are posited:

*RQ7a.* What degree of valence is used in team-related comments?

*RQ7b.* Is there a significant difference between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the degree of valence employed when teams were discussed?

*RQ8a.* What degree of valence is used in athlete-related comments?

*RQ8b.* Is there a significant difference between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the degree of valence employed when athletes were discussed?

*RQ9.* Is there was a difference between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the overall degree of valence employed in the comments?

Although geopolitical factors play an influential role in shaping people's perceptions and expectations towards a particular game and even sports in general (Allison, 2000), the richness of the discussion about the World Cup coupled with ample attention from Chinese people could potentially provide scholars a different approach to understanding the World Cup – and mega-sporting events in general.

**Method**
To address these research questions, the current study employed content analysis to categorize and analyze the microblogs on Sina Weibo. The unit of analysis was each microblog posted by Chinese users.

*Sampling*
To examine Chinese people's online discussions of the World Cup, a sample of microblogs was collected from a 34-day-period, from June 12 to July 15, 2014, which included one pre-World Cup day, the whole period of World Cup, and one post-World Cup day. The time slot between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. (CST) was selected to ensure that no games or special events happening on the field could become primary influences on discussions about the World Cup.

The World Cup was used as the keyword searched via the Weibo Search, and only original microblogs were included in the sample. An original microblog refers to the microblogs that are not retweeted, thus containing the blogger's original thoughts or comments. Selecting this type of comments could reflect the most original and diverse content of the online discussions of the World Cup on Weibo. As the current research examined people's discussions about the World Cup, only those posts discussing this topic or certain aspects of the topic were included in the sample. Thus, unrelated advertisements, online activities, campaigns, and microblogs that simply mentioned the World Cup or failed to offer any specific descriptions or discussions about the topic were excluded from the sample. The first 250 microblogs appearing in the search results and closely related to the World Cup via the aforementioned parameters were selected each day, generating a total of 8,500 microblog posts in the sample.

*Measurement*
The current study also adopted theme or category as the unit of analysis, with inductive coding techniques utilized to ensure the diversity and validity of the coding categories, as no known prior research has been conducted in this particular context in China.

*Codebook*
To answer the research questions, the study employed thematic analysis methods using constant comparative methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). June 12 was selected because it was one day before the first game, providing a more diverse discussion regarding the World Cup. Based on the content of these microblog posts, themes and approaches were summarized and compared in order to generate different categories in response to each research question (Sanderson, 2013). In this process, the researcher reduced and summarized the categories as much as possible,

ensuring that no new categorizations would elicit confounding variables to the current study (Sanderson, 2013).

After the initial categories were established, the usefulness and reliability of the categories were examined (Suter and Daas, 2007). Another 300 microblogs were randomly selected from the June 12 sample to test the developed categories. Because of the interpretative nature of the current research, several categories in a single microblog under one research question were permitted (Sanderson, 2013). All categories that were applied were coded according to each research question. New observations in the coding were accounted for, with new categories included if significant reliability of such category occurred (Sanderson, 2013). The final categories reported below were developed according to the coding of the total sample.

*RQ1* asked what kinds of fanship associated with the World Cup were more likely to be expressed on Sina Weibo. First, the microblog post was coded to identify if there was an expression of fanship. Conceptually, fanship refers to the identification or the personal connection with an object itself, such as a sports team (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010). Based on factors developed in the Fanship Scale (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010), fanship-oriented comment was coded when the microblog included items such as emotional and psychological connectedness with the interest; investment of time, energy or money; expression and perception of in-group vs out-group. If expressions of fanship could be identified, the type of fanship was coded based on five categories: fan of the World Cup, fan of a team, fan of athlete(s), fan of soccer, and other. One example of the fanship of World Cup was "Watching the World Cup makes me forget about the time! So, during this month, I will probably keep doing that. I love the World Cup!"

*RQ2* asked what major topics were covered in the discussions about the 2014 World Cup. Ten categories of themes were identified: win or loss of a game (e.g. either pre-game: "Two strong teams, who will win tonight?" or post-game: "England has lost the game. Sigh."), the powerful influence of World Cup (e.g. "Everything on Weibo is about the World Cup. I can't stand it anymore!"), who will win the 2014 World Cup factual information or news about 2014 World Cup (e.g. information of the culture of Brazil) disappointment or shame about China not participating in the game (e.g. "China does not play in the game, then what's the point of watching the World Cup? I guess the only way to see China playing in the World Cup is to host the World Cup") teams athletes, expression of fanship (e.g. "I support Messi, you are always my hero!") who will win the Golden Boot, social gathering (e.g. "Watching the World Cup with my friends! Yay!"), and others.

*RQ3* sought to determine whether differences existed in the topics discussed in fanship comments and non-fanship comments. *RQ1* established five categories of fanship that were expressed in the online discussion of the World Cup. Fanship comments were coded when at least one type of fanship was exhibited in the comment. Comments not including expressions of fanship were coded as non-fanship comments. *RQ2* identified ten categories of topics addressed by bloggers. Based on the presence/ absence of expressed fanship, $\chi^2$ tests were conducted to determine if significant differences existed in each category of the major topics between fanship and non-fanship comments.

*RQ4* examined people's motivations of their participations in the discussion. Four coding categories were developed: peer pressure/social pressure (e.g. "Everything is about World Cup these days. I need to be in fashion! Otherwise, I cannot join in the conversation with my friends anymore"); sense of belonging (e.g. fanship or emotional

connectedness) or excitement about the World Cup; seeking more information/ curiosity; and others. Sense of belonging was exhibited by the descriptions of fanship, membership, and an emphasis of sense of attachment or commitment. One example for sense of belonging would be "The World Cup is here! It reminds me of all those old days! I am watching the World Cup again this year! I am not the same person. None of my old friends are now here with me to watch the game." Seeking more information could reveal a tone of curiosity and the expression of looking for more information in the microblog. One example would be "I have never been a soccer fan in my life. But the news said China won the game. What exactly happened, does anybody know???"

*RQ5* pertained to specific aspects of team-related comments participants were most likely to utilize. Five coding categories were developed based on the coding of all samples: championship (e.g. they are going to win the championship), athletic performances (e.g. they played well in this battle against Brazil), playing styles (e.g. they love to use the short passing combination to control their opponents), history/ legacy/achievement, and other.

*RQ6* investigated the specific topics discussed in the coverage of athletes. To answer this question, the researcher adopted part of the categories developed in the work of Billings *et al.* (2015). Emotion, appearance, personality and physicality (size and height) were influential factors in the coverage of sports fans' commentaries about the in-groups and out-groups (Billings *et al.*, 2015). In addition, based on the initial coding process, performances in the past and the stories associated with his career, and others were also included in the coding categories.

*RQ7a* and *RQ8a* examined the valence of team-related comments and athlete-related comments, respectively. Microblogs were coded into three categories: negative, neutral, and positive. In order to answer *RQ6b* and *RQ7b*, $\chi^2$ tests were conducted to determine the relationship between discussions of fanship and degree of valence in two types of comments.

*RQ9* examined if there was a difference of the valence used between fanship comments and non-fanship comments. Fanship comments were identified when at least one type of fanship was expressed in the comments. Non-fanship comments included two situations: no specific fanship was expressed and the expressions of not a fan were identified. In terms of the valence, each microblog was coded into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. For this research questions, the unit of analysis was each microblog post.

*Coding procedures and intercoder reliability*
Two bilingual coders were trained to read each microblog in detail. The first author thoroughly explained the coding protocol to a doctoral student, ensuring a high agreement on the coding criteria. After the training, the coders were separated to code the rest of the sample. If questions occurred, two coders met and resolved the questions before the actual coding.

To test intercoder reliability, the coders chose five days of coding: a pre-World Cup day, one group game day, one round-of-16 day, one semi-final day, and the final day. A total of 15 percent subsample (1,250 microblog posts) were coded by two coders for intercoder reliability. Cohen's $\kappa$ was used to measure the intercoder reliability for each category. The two coders reached an overall $\kappa$ of 0.81 (0.79 for fanship expressed, 0.77 for major topics identified, 0.76 for motivation, 0.82 for themes in team-related comments, 0.85 for the degree of valence in team-related comments, 0.82 for themes in athlete-related comments, 0.84 for the degree of valence in athlete-related comments,

0.80 for the degree of valence in each microblog). $\kappa$ scores above 0.75 illustrates outstanding agreement (Olswang *et al.*, 2006). After the intercoder reliability was established, one coder coded 50 percent of the remaining sample, which included those posted from June 12 to June 28, 2014 and another coder coded the rest of the samples from June 29 to July 15, 2014. SPSS for Windows (Version 22.0) was used to conduct the data analysis through descriptive statistics and $\chi^2$ tests.

## Results

In total, over 140 million original microblog posts including the keyword, "World Cup," were posted from June 12 to July 15, 2014 on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo. An overview of the changes in the numbers of microblog posts about the World Cup over time are reported in Figure 1.

Notably, the number of comments reached its peak on the final day of the World Cup (July 14) at about 58 million. Otherwise, the number of comments remained at a stable level of between three and ten million posts per day.

*RQ1* pertained to fanship expressed in relation to the World Cup. Of the overall total, 28.4 percent of all posts expressed fanship ($n = 2,415$). The most prominent fanship expressed by bloggers was fan of the World Cup (14.1 percent, $n = 1,195$), followed by fan of a team (9.9 percent, $n = 841$), fan of an athlete (3.9 percent, $n = 331$), and soccer fan (0.5 percent, $n = 48$). Fanship classified as "other" was relatively scant ($n = 6$).

*RQ2* sought to determine the major topics covered in discussions about the World Cup; a total of 12,682 topic-related descriptors were identified. News and factual information about the World Cup was the most prominent topic (36.0 percent, $n = 4,547$), followed by expressions of fanship (14.2 percent, $n = 1,794$), win or loss of a game (11.9 percent, $n = 1,504$), teams (10.7 percent, $n = 1,361$), athletes (9.1 percent, $n = 1,142$), who will be the champion (5.3 percent, $n = 672$), the powerful influence of the World Cup (4.8 percent, $n = 603$), social gathering (3.1 percent, $n = 391$), others (2.7 percent, $n = 338$), disappointment or shame of China's absence in the World Cup (2.4 percent, $n = 307$), and who will win the Golden Boot (0.2 percent, $n = 23$).

*RQ3* sought to ascertain differences between the topics discussed in fanship-comments and non-fanship comments. Table I reports these differences.

A $\chi^2$ test was conducted for each topic-related category (except the category of expression of fanship) to determine if there was a relationship between fanship comments
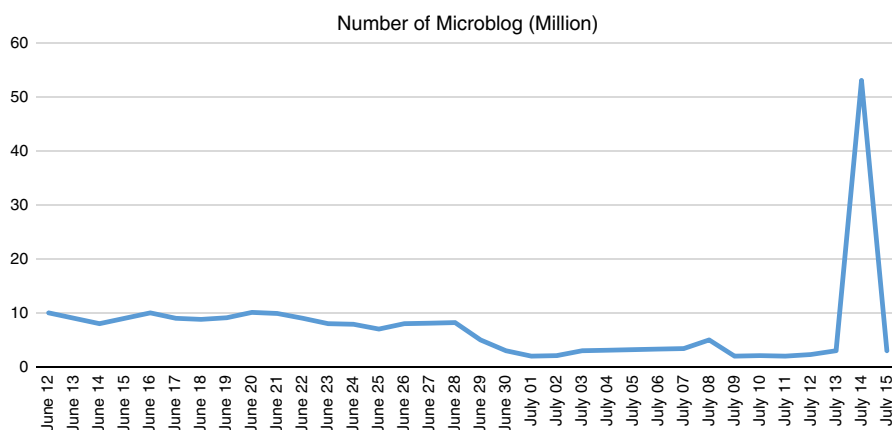


Figure 1.
Number of
Microblogs from
June 12 to July
15 (million)

**Table I.**
Comparing topics
in fan comments

| Topic-related category | $\chi^{2a}$ | $p$-value |
| --- | --- | --- |
| News and factual information | 1,249.00 | 0.00** |
| Win or loss of a game | 109.35 | 0.00** |
| Teams | 128.14 | 0.00** |
| Athletes | 36.62 | 0.00** |
| Who will be 2014 World Cup champion | 30.79 | 0.00** |
| Powerful influence of the World Cup | 19.13 | 0.00** |
| Social gathering | 124.34 | 0.00** |
| Who will win the Golden Boot | 0.17 | 0.46 |
| China not playing in the World Cup | 9.62 | 0.00** |

**Notes:** [a]df = 1. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

and each topic. Significant differences were found between fanship and all topic-related categories, except the topic of who will win the Golden Boot. People who expressed at least one type of fanship were more likely to talk about news or factual information of the World Cup, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 1249.00$, $p < 0.001$; for win or loss of a game, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 109.35$, $p < 0.001$; teams, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 128.14$, $p < 0.001$; athletes, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 36.62$, $p < 0.001$; who will be the champion of 2014 World Cup, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 30.79$, $p < 0.001$; and social gathering, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 124.34$, $p < 0.001$. While non-fan bloggers were more likely to discuss the World Cup's powerful influence, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 19.13$, $p < 0.001$ and express their disappointment or shame about China not playing in the World Cup, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 9.62$, $p < 0.001$. *RQ4* investigated the most prominent motivations of Weibo bloggers; a total of 2,799 descriptors were identified as motivations. Sense of belonging was found to be the most prominent motivation (79.3 percent, $n = 2,221$), followed by seeking more information or the expression of curiosity (14.2 percent, $n = 398$) and peer or social pressure (6.4 percent, $n = 180$).

*RQ5* examined the most-utilized aspects within team-related comments; a total of 1,361 descriptors were identified as team-related comments. Among them, athletic performance was the most frequently discussed topic (59 percent, $n = 803$), followed by history (17.9 percent, $n = 243$), championship (12.0 percent, $n = 164$), and playing style (7.5 percent, $n = 101$).

*RQ6* investigated the most-discussed aspects within athlete-related comments; a total of 1,141 athlete-related descriptors were identified in the sample. In terms of the specific aspects utilized, athletic performance was found to be the most prominent topic in athlete-related comments (48.6 percent, $n = 555$), followed by achievements or stories related to career (18.8 percent, $n = 215$), appearance (15.6 percent, $n = 178$), emotion (10.2 percent, $n = 116$), personality (6.1 percent, $n = 71$), and size/height (0.8 percent, $n = 9$).

*RQ7a* sought to uncover the degree of valence employed in team-related comments. Positive valence was found in 61.0 percent ($n = 829$) of the team-related comments, while 17.4 percent ($n = 283$) utilized negative valence. The rest of the team-related comments (21.6 percent, $n = 249$) were identified as neutral valence. *RQ7b* investigated if there was significant difference in the degree of valence employed between fanship-comments and non-fanship comments when teams were discussed. Significant differences were found, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 141.21$, $p < 0.001$. People who identified themselves as fans were more likely than non-fan bloggers to use positive and neutral valence when discussing teams.

*RQ8a* examined the degree of valence in athlete-related comments. The majority of athlete-related comments employed positive valence (70.8 percent, $n = 808$).

Negative valence was found in 12 percent ($n = 137$) of the comments while neutral valence was found in 17.2 percent ($n = 196$) of the comments. A total of 1,141 (13.4 percent) athlete-related descriptors were identified in the sample. In terms of the specific aspects utilized, athletic performance was found to be the most prominent topic in athlete-related comments (48.6 percent, $n = 555$), followed by achievements or stories related to his career (18.8 percent, $n = 215$), appearance (15.6 percent, $n = 178$), emotion (10.2 percent, $n = 116$), personality (6.1 percent, $n = 71$), and size/height (0.8 percent, $n = 9$). *RQ8b* investigated if there was significant difference in the degree of valence employed between fanship-comments and non-fanship comments when athletes were discussed. Significant differences were found, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 18.80$, $p < 0.001$. People who identify themselves as fans were more likely than non-fan bloggers to use negative valence when discussing athletes.

*RQ9* queried whether significant differences existed in the degree of valence employed between fanship-comments and non-fanship comments. Overall, positive valence was more prevalent in fanship comments than in non-fanship comments, $\chi^2(1, n = 8,500) = 110.1$, $p < 0.001$. The correlation between discussions of fanship and positive valence in athlete-related comments contributed most to the significant differences as a whole.

## Discussion
This study explored what Chinese people talked about during the World Cup on Weibo and why they engaged in the event even though their home national team did not participate in it. As such, the study advances the work of Hoeber *et al.* (2016), who found sport as a useful nexus for building online communities through microblogging platforms. However, this study augments the works of scholars such as Zheng *et al.* (2016) that found online communities could be built among high-involvement individuals, showing in the case of China and the World Cup, that one can be both an out-group and a high-involvement group. In cases such as what was presented for China, the result is a community speaking about the World Cup differently, but no less validly.

One insightful finding was that comments exhibited dramatically different foci and degrees of valence. For instance, fanship comments were more likely than non-fanship comments to use positive valence. One possible explanation is that two difference groups were formed on Sina Weibo: fans and non-fans group. SIT asserts that the identity of self is conceptualized based on both assimilations and distinctions with others (Turner *et al.*, 1987). In the narrative of the World Cup, degrees of valence may be used to exhibit people's identity as either fans or non-fans. Moreover, previous work found that sports consumers benefited from the increased sense of belong and self-worth (Oakes and Turner, 1980; Turner, 1975). Consequently, people who expressed fanship were more likely to discuss the World Cup in a positive light than the others, ensuring the importance and the value of their group. In addition, people may discuss topics that were more closely related to the event, such as teams, athletes, and factual information/news about the World Cup, to show their identifications as the in-groups.

By contrast, non-fan bloggers tended to discuss the powerful influence of the World Cup in a negative valence and express shame/disappointment about the Chinese team not participating in this event. These bloggers seemingly admitted the powerful influence of such a global event, but devalued the World Cup by utilizing a negative valence in order to maintain self-esteem as perceived out-group members of the World Cup.

The dynamics lying in the content and the valence of the discussions revealed the most fundamental function of self-categorization: to maintain and even boost people's self-worth and self-esteem by identifying themselves with groups (Tajfel, 1982).

Under the framework of SIT, focus on nation is a prevalent tendency in sports media in a global scale (Billings *et al.*, 2011; Anderson, 1991; Real, 1989). The impressive viewership an event like the World Cup enjoys coupled with the amount of related discussions, typically leads to a focus on national status. However, lack of participation seemingly made nationalism less prominent in the special case of the World Cup in China. Granted, nationalistic attitudes were still identified in comments about the World Cup on Weibo and, even though the number of nationalistic comments were relatively small, it did not necessarily mean that nationalism was not undergirding larger discussions. However, it is fair to conclude that it was less prominent than if China had been one of the 32 nations competing in the World Cup, as people who most closely identify with nationalistic attitudes were less likely to comment on an event that China did not participate in.

In addition, nationalism is often construed as comparative pride (Bairner, 2001). Because of the nature of pride, nationalism could be more of a cognitive construct more closely related to positive valences or emotions. Thus, nationalism could be a notion more closely related to the pride of success and in-group membership than a concept revealed by the shame/disappointment about failure or being an out-group. Consequently, it appeared that nationalistic attitudes needed more direct stimuli, such as news or commentaries that promoted nationalistic attitudes. The absence of such triggers could result in an audience less likely to actively express nationalistic attitudes. Future research could conduct surveys or interviews to explore the concept of sport-based nationalism, especially in the case when one's home country was not part of a mega-sporting event.

As China is perceived as an out-group of this international mega-sporting event, the fear of missing out, unpacked as influences of people's psychological well-being and satisfaction with social media engagement (Przybylski *et al.*, 2013), could be a factor in triggering Chinese people's generalized interests in the World Cup. Online platforms, such as Sina Weibo, could increase the inclusion of the out-groups and their opportunity to be associated with ongoing social events and larger social structures. The dominance of factual information and the prominence of fan self-categorization could be a reflection of the trend of fear of missing out on Chinese social media.

Moreover, the proportion of positive valence was found to be at least three times higher than the proportion of microblogs expressing fanship. This could be considered as a result of the relatively neutral framing in the World Cup telecasts in China. As China did not play a role in the World Cup, commentators and audiences could experience lower pressure and held less fervent nationalism when watching and commenting about the World Cup. In this case, people would be more likely to appreciate the athletic skills and the successes of other countries. In addition, the findings also imply important insight regarding electronic commerce opportunities. As Weibo attracted millions of users who were interested in the World Cup, it may also provide the sports organization a unique opportunity for advertising (see Devlin *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, the findings of the study provide baseline data for marketing professionals, which could help sports organizations to tailor their services and products based on Chinese sports consumers' needs and interests.

Another interesting finding was the focus on athletic performances found in both athlete-related and team-related comments, as roughly half of these types of comments

were associated with athletic performances. Previous studies found that athletic skills were prominent in both US and Chinese telecasts of the Olympics (Billings *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, foreign athletes are more likely to be portrayed in a one-dimensional way, such as being emotionless (Billings *et al.*, 2015). As a result, mass media's emphasis on athletic skills and the downplaying of other facets of teams and athletes could potentially be reflected in social media discussions.

It was important to note that this study had several limitations. First, the number of keywords utilized in the Weibo search was relatively limited. Nation-specific keywords could be added to generate a more diverse sample. Second, the content analysis only examined the first 250 microblog posts each day in the search results. This convenient sample might not represent the full array of the Chinese bloggers' online discussions. Additionally, as no previous studies about this particular topic have been conducted, the categories developed for this study could be further tested in other contexts when home nations did not participate in certain events. Moreover, future research could examine the media portrayal of the World Cup in China to test agenda-setting functions of media rendered via public opinion on social media. Finally, future researchers could employ surveys or interviews to further investigate Chinese audiences' attitudes and perceptions about the World Cup.

This study provides valuable insights to the Chinese public discussions about the World Cup when China was not participating, outlining how people interpreted and reacted to the World Cup, showing a diminished focus on nationalized qualities. The study also contributes in the area of social media by incorporating the perspectives of social identity and nationalism into the sports and social media context, providing new directions for international sport communication research and for understanding online social discussions as a whole.

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