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Metaphoric Gestures in Professional Football: A Conceptual Metaphor Theory Analysis of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines metaphoric gestures performed by professional footballers and event participants during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, analyzed through Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). Drawing on photographic documentation as primary data, the study systematically investigates ten discrete gestural events, each demonstrating identifiable source-target mappings: the opening ceremony handshake between Morgan Freeman and Qatari youth ambassador Ghanim Al-Muftah (UNITY IS BRIDGING PHYSICAL DISTANCE), the Iranian team's silent anthem protest (SILENCE IS RESISTANCE), the German team's collective hand-to-mouth gesture (COVERING IS SUPPRESSION), the Japanese coach's bow (LOWERING IS RESPECT), the Moroccan team's collective prostration (LOWERING IS GRATITUDE), Lionel Messi's ear-cupping (HEARING IS CONFRONTATION), Emiliano Martinez's trophy gesture (PHYSICAL VULGARITY IS DOMINANCE), Cristiano Ronaldo's silencing gesture (SILENCING IS CONTROL), Ismaila Sarr's eye-covering gesture (COVERING EYES IS WILLFUL IGNORANCE), and the bisht-draping ceremony (CULTURAL ADORNMENT IS INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMIZATION). Analysis reveals that these gestures operate systematically within four conceptual categories: vertical orientation, silence and sound, visual attention, and position or power mapping. The findings emphasize embodied cognition's critical role in high-stakes sports contexts, demonstrating how athletes and event participants strategically deploy physical movements to communicate cultural identity, political resistance, institutional critique, spiritual acknowledgment, and transnational advocacy. This study advances theoretical understanding of gesture-based visual communication in professional sports and contributes to scholarship at the intersection of CMT, multimodality, and embodied metaphor.

Introduction

The 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted in Qatar from November 20 to December 18, took place in an atmosphere characterized by intense global scrutiny and socio-political controversy. The event's unique cultural and institutional context provided an exceptional setting for examining metaphoric gestures as deliberate acts of embodied communication within professional sports. Throughout the tournament, footballers and event participants engaged in gestures that transcended spontaneous emotional reactions, communicating complex abstract meanings including political dissent, cultural reverence, spiritual gratitude, and institutional critique (Gibbs, 2017). Analyzing these embodied gestures through systematic theoretical frameworks reveals how athletes exploit global sporting stages to convey nuanced symbolic meanings in ways that evade institutional constraints on verbal expression.

Embodied metaphoric gestures have increasingly been recognized as significant forms of nonverbal and visual communication, particularly within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), CMT posits that abstract concepts, or target domains, are understood through systematic mappings from concrete physical experiences, or source domains. Within sporting contexts, CMT is especially pertinent because athletes routinely use gestures to symbolize abstract ideas: raising arms to represent ascent and victory, or covering the mouth to symbolize institutional suppression (Cienki and Muller, 2008; McNeill,

To capture the layered meanings communicated through these gestures, this study also employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). This framework enables understanding of gestures not as isolated physical acts but as integral elements within multimodal texts that interact dynamically with visual symbolism, spatial arrangement, and institutional context (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). By combining CMT and MDA, this research deepens scholarly understanding of how professional footballers and event participants deploy embodied gestures strategically within complex discursive and institutional frameworks. The study addresses the following research questions:

Research questions

1. How do professional footballers systematically use embodied metaphoric gestures to communicate abstract meanings during the 2022 FIFA World Cup?
2. What patterns emerge within the conceptual mappings of gestures employed throughout the tournament?
3. In what ways do cultural, political, and institutional contexts shape and amplify the meanings conveyed through these gestures?

The study pursues three primary objectives: it critically examines how the politically charged and culturally significant context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup influenced the symbolic resonance of participants' gestures; it systematically applies CMT to identify mappings between physical actions and the abstract concepts they symbolize; and it uses MDA to explore how these gestures function as complex multimodal texts, offering insights into the performative and communicative dimensions of embodied metaphor in professional sports.

Literature Review

Metaphoric Gestures: Theoretical Foundations

The scholarly study of metaphoric gestures is rooted in the foundational work of McNeill (1992, 2005), whose research demonstrated that gestures serve as windows into cognitive processes, translating abstract mental representations into embodied physical expressions. McNeill's (2005) concept of the imagery-language dialectic emphasizes the dynamic interaction between thought, language, and gesture, revealing how abstract notions such as emotions and intentions manifest through bodily movements. His classification of gestures into iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat types has proved foundational for subsequent gesture research, with metaphoric gestures specifically encoding conceptual metaphors in bodily form (Cienki and Muller, 2008).

Building upon McNeill's foundational contributions, Kendon (1980, 2004) established that gestures are systematically structured rather than random, identifying a hierarchical organization of gestural phrases and phases that underscores their purposeful communicative function. Further extending these foundational ideas, Muller (2014) described metaphoric gestures as operating simultaneously on multiple levels: as spontaneous emotional responses, conventionalized symbolic acts, and manifestations of deeper conceptual metaphors. This multilayered nature is particularly relevant in professional sports, where athletes communicate complex meanings within regulated and culturally diverse contexts (Muller, 2014).

Cienki (2008) further underlined the multifunctionality of metaphoric gestures, demonstrating that they serve simultaneously as cognitive tools for organizing abstract thought and as social-interactional resources for signaling emotional states and interpersonal relationships. Lhommet and Marsella (2014) proposed a computational model in which metaphoric gestures function as grounded representations of mental states, mapping abstract mental representations to physical actions through primary metaphors and operating as cognitive bridges between thought and action. These insights establish gestures as multifaceted communicative acts deeply embedded in cognitive and social interaction frameworks.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory in Sports Contexts

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, initially articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), proposes that abstract concepts are comprehended through systematic mappings onto concrete physical experiences. The theory has since been applied extensively to sports contexts. Gibbs (2017) demonstrated how embodied experiences in competitive environments shape athletes' metaphorical expressions, suggesting that physical competition profoundly informs metaphoric cognition. Johnson (2017) argued that athletes' gestures explicitly reflect conceptual metaphors associated with competitive concepts such as victory, defeat, dominance, and resistance, establishing clear frameworks for analyzing systematic metaphorical mappings in sports.

Expanding on these foundations, Kovecses (2020) explored how athletes use compound metaphoric gestures, combining multiple source domains to express sophisticated conceptual metaphors during high-stakes events. Such compound gestures are especially evident in global tournaments like the FIFA World Cup, where athletes' gestures simultaneously convey multiple layers of meaning shaped by political, cultural, and institutional contexts (Kovecses, 2020);

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysis provides critical analytical tools for examining how meaning emerges through the interplay of various semiotic modes, including visual, gestural, spatial, linguistic, and institutional elements (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009). Originating from systemic-functional linguistics and social semiotics, MDA enables researchers to analyze gestures not merely as isolated physical acts but as integrated components within multimodal texts, deeply connected to broader social and cultural contexts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) demonstrated that metaphoric gestures function as intersemiotic constructions that simultaneously convey conceptual meaning and reinforce the broader discursive framework within which they are embedded. In football, this means that gestures such as goal celebrations, protest actions, and ceremonial movements operate within a structured system of meaning-making that transcends individual intention.

Cultural Semiotics and Gesture in Global Sports

Global sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup function as massive stages for the projection and negotiation of cultural identities. Barthes (1972) demonstrated how everyday practices, including sports, become vehicles for the construction of collective myths and cultural narratives. More recently, Magrath (2021) analyzed how gestures and acts of protest during global

Identifying the Research Gap

The synthesis of scholarship across metaphor theory, emotional communication, cultural semiotics, and multimodal analysis reveals a notable research gap. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to metaphors in sports language, emotional expression through facial displays, and cultural representation in media, the systematic, multimodal, and culturally contextualized analysis of metaphoric gestures performed by athletes and participants during global sporting events remains underexplored. Existing studies have not comprehensively addressed how gestures at events like FIFA 2022 simultaneously function as metaphoric, emotional, and cultural performances, nor have they sufficiently theorized the complex layering of meaning that emerges when bodily acts embody abstract concepts within politically and culturally charged arenas. The present study addresses this gap.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in document-based and photographic analysis. Consistent with the epistemological commitments of qualitative inquiry, the research prioritizes depth of interpretation over statistical generalization, seeking to understand how meaning is constructed through embodied actions in a specific socio-political context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative orientation is appropriate given that the phenomena under investigation, namely the communicative dimensions of metaphoric gestures, are inherently interpretive and context-dependent.

The primary data source consists of photographic documentation and broadcast imagery of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Gesture selection followed a purposive sampling strategy aimed at maximizing theoretical relevance and conceptual diversity. Ten gestural events were selected on the basis of three criteria: the presence of a clearly identifiable source-target mapping consistent with CMT principles; the gesture's occurrence in a publicly documented and verifiable context; and the potential of the gesture to illuminate patterns across the four conceptual categories of

interest, namely vertical orientation, silence and sound, visual attention, and position or power mapping.

Each gesture was analyzed through a two-stage interpretive process. In the first stage, CMT was applied to identify the source domain (the physical action or bodily configuration), the target domain (the abstract concept being communicated), and the specific conceptual metaphor instantiated by the mapping. In the second stage, MDA was applied to examine the multimodal dimensions of each gesture, including spatial positioning, temporal context, material properties, and institutional framing, following the analytical principles established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This two-stage process enabled a comprehensive analysis that attends to both the cognitive architecture of each gesture and its communicative function within broader multimodal and institutional contexts.

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. As a qualitative, interpretive investigation, its findings are not designed to be generalized statistically across all sporting contexts. Additionally, because gestures are analyzed through broadcast and photographic representations rather than through direct observation, the analysis remains necessarily mediated by choices of framing and editing made by broadcast professionals. Nevertheless, this limitation is shared by all scholarship that analyzes public media events, and the richness of the available photographic record makes the 2022 World Cup a particularly well-documented site for this kind of analysis.

Analysis

Gesture 1: Morgan Freeman and Ghanim Al-Muftah: UNITY IS BRIDGING PHYSICAL DISTANCE

The opening ceremony of the tournament featured a pivotal metaphoric gesture between actor Morgan Freeman and Qatari youth ambassador Ghanim Al-Muftah. Freeman extended his hand downward toward Al-Muftah, who reached upward to make physical contact, instantiating the conceptual metaphor UNITY IS BRIDGING PHYSICAL DISTANCE. The gesture occurred during a scripted dialogue focused on acceptance and diversity, materializing abstract concepts of inclusion and tolerance (Naveed, 2022).

Figure 1

Metaphoric gesture between actor Morgan Freeman and Qatari youth ambassador Ghanim Al-Muftah



Spatially, the vertical hierarchy created by Freeman's standing height juxtaposed with Al-Muftah's seated position was symbolically dismantled through their hand connection, visually representing the overcoming of power differentials through mutual acknowledgment. Contrasting physical characteristics, including differences in age, physical condition, and attire, functioned as additional visual source domains mapping onto the target domain of global unity despite difference. This gesture exemplifies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) principle that physical positions, visual contrasts, and embodied actions collectively construct institutional meaning, demonstrating the sophisticated use of embodied metaphor in global sports diplomacy.

Gesture 2: Iranian Team's Silent Protest: SILENCE IS RESISTANCE

The Iranian national team's refusal to sing their national anthem before their opening match against England constitutes a profound metaphoric gesture instantiating SILENCE IS RESISTANCE. This act of collective silence occurred amid significant sociopolitical upheaval in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody (Jaworski, 1993). The mapping operates through physical silence (source domain) onto political resistance (target domain). The players' closed mouths during a moment traditionally demanding patriotic vocalization created a perceptible absence that paradoxically amplified their political message, consistent with Jaworski's (1993) argument that silence can be as powerful as speech when social expectations demand

Figure 2

Metaphoric gesture of Iranian National Team's Silent Protest During National Anthem



Gesture 3: German Team's Hand-to-Mouth: COVERING IS SUPPRESSION

The German national team's coordinated hand-to-mouth gesture before their opening match against Japan represents a sophisticated embodiment of the conceptual metaphor COVERING IS SUPPRESSION. This protest emerged in response to FIFA's prohibition against wearing the OneLove armband in support of LGBTQ+ rights (Magrath, 2021). The mapping operates through physical covering of the mouth (source domain) representing institutional suppression of expression (target domain). The synchronization of the gesture across all eleven players, including the goalkeeper, created what Kovecses (2020) identifies as a compound metaphoric expression, simultaneously invoking SILENCE IS IMPOSED EXTERNALLY and COLLECTIVE ACTION

IS STRENGTH. The team's formation in standard pre-match positioning, with a front row kneeling and a back row standing, created vertical stratification that amplified visual impact while ensuring each player's gesture remained visible to cameras. The collective coordination of this gesture transformed personal dissent into institutional critique, demonstrating that meaning emerged not from individual expression but from synchronized multiplicity, consistent with Muller's (2014) analysis of gestural modes of collective representation.

Figure 3

Metaphoric gesture of German Team's Hand-to-Mouth



Gesture 4: Japanese Coach Bowing: LOWERING IS RESPECT

Head Coach Hajime Moriyasu's deep bowing gesture following Japan's elimination against Croatia instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOWERING IS RESPECT. This gesture, performed with the torso bent approximately 45 degrees and hands placed formally at the sides, exemplifies Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) concept of embodied cognition, in which abstract concepts like respect are understood through physical orientation. The bow materializes the Japanese cultural concept of enryo, encompassing restraint, modesty, and consideration that extends beyond simple politeness to represent moral character. Spatially, the positioning on the pitch sideline transformed an intimate cultural practice into a global spectacle, while the temporal execution of the bow immediately after defeat, rather than in victory, reinforced its association with dignity under adversity.

The contrast between this restrained gesture and more emotionally demonstrative expressions typical in Western football contexts created what Kovecses (2020) would term cross-cultural metaphoric dissonance, highlighting alternative models of athletic comportment within a global institutional frame. A second related gesture, Maya Yoshida's lowering of himself to meet his children's height on the pitch after elimination, instantiated a distinct but related mapping:

Figure 4

Metaphoric gesture of Head Coach Hajime Moriyasu and Maya Yoshida



Gesture 5: Moroccan Team's Prostration: LOWERING IS GRATITUDE

The Moroccan national team's collective *sujud* (prostration) after their historic victory against Spain represents a profound embodiment of LOWERING IS GRATITUDE while simultaneously functioning as a powerful assertion of cultural and religious identity on a global stage. The mapping operates through physical lowering (source domain) structuring understanding of gratitude and submission to a divine presence (target domain). The players' synchronized movement from standing celebration to collective prostration created a compound metaphoric gesture expressing both ACHIEVEMENT IS DIVINE BLESSING and GRATITUDE IS PHYSICAL LOWERING (Kovecses, 2020). This was especially significant given Morocco's position as the first African and Arab nation to reach a World Cup semi-final, contextualizing success within a religious framework that attributes accomplishment to divine providence rather than exclusively to human agency. The tight circular formation of prostrating bodies, uniformly oriented toward Mecca, produced what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify as visual rhyme, reinforcing collective identity through synchronized bodily positioning. The substitution of prostration for conventional victory celebration created a deliberate contrast between the dominant secular-triumphalist celebratory frame and spiritual acknowledgment, prioritizing divine gratitude over triumphalism (Muller, 2014). Performed within FIFA's predominantly secular institutional framework, this gesture asserted the legitimacy of non-Western religious expression within international sport.

Figure 5

Metaphoric gesture of Moroccan Team's Prostration



Gesture 6: Messi's Ear-Cupping: HEARING IS CONFRONTATION

Lionel Messi's ear-cupping gesture during Argentina's quarter-final against the Netherlands represents a sophisticated embodiment of the conceptual metaphor HEARING IS CONFRONTATION. Performed after scoring in the penalty shootout, and directed specifically toward the Dutch bench following intense verbal exchanges throughout the match, this gesture transformed an auditory function into an act of competitive dominance and retaliatory communication. By cupping his ears with both hands, Messi paradoxically signaled enhanced auditory attention while implying the absence of meaningful opposition, creating what Kovecses (2020) identifies as a compound metaphoric expression combining SILENCE IS DEFEAT and HEARING IS DOMINANCE. The directional specificity of the gesture toward the Dutch bench rather than toward fans or teammates created what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) term a directional vector, establishing a clear communicative channel with specific intended recipients. This directional precision created a focused communicative act precisely directed at identifiable interlocutors within the stadium space. The gesture's deployment during a moment conventionally reserved for personal celebration demonstrates a deliberate substitution of confrontational communication for expected emotional expression (Muller, 2014).

Figure 6

Metaphoric gesture of Lionel Messi's ear-cupping



Gesture 7: Martinez's Trophy Gesture: PHYSICAL VULGARITY IS DOMINANCE

Emiliano Martinez's controversial gesture with the Golden Glove award during the official awards ceremony represents a complex embodiment of PHYSICAL VULGARITY IS DOMINANCE. The goalkeeper placed the golden trophy against his groin while making expressions of triumph, deliberately transgressing institutional norms within FIFA's most formal ceremonial context. The mapping operates through physical vulgarity (source domain) structuring understanding of competitive dominance (target domain). By repositioning a prestigious institutional object within a sexually suggestive configuration, Martinez created what Kovecses (2020) identifies as metaphoric subversion, deliberately inverting conventional meanings. The spatial context of the elevated awards podium, the most symbolically charged location in FIFA's ceremonial geography, amplified the transgressive impact of the gesture. The juxtaposition of Martinez with Qatari officials in traditional dress created what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify as spatial juxtaposition between contrasting cultural systems. FIFA's subsequent modification of trophy presentation protocols reflects an institutional response to the perceived disruptive potential of embodied metaphor within ceremonial contexts, highlighting the capacity of gesture to challenge institutional authority.

Figure 7

Metaphoric (vulgar) gesture of Emiliano Martinez



Gesture 8: Ronaldo's Silencing Gesture: SILENCING IS CONTROL

Cristiano Ronaldo's finger-to-lips gesture after scoring against Ghana exemplifies SILENCING IS CONTROL while simultaneously demonstrating the paradoxical capacity of performed silence to amplify rather than suppress expression. This act, executed in the 65th minute, constitutes what Acheson (2008) terms an active human performance of silence, where the absence of speech becomes an embodied rhetorical strategy. The gesture operates through a multimodal interplay of visual and spatial elements. Ronaldo's direct gaze toward cameras, combined with a rigid upright posture, transformed the silencing motion into an existential gesture materializing abstract assertions of dominance. The stadium's cacophonous environment, with crowd noise and competing audiovisual elements, created a semiotically charged space in which the visual salience of the gesture gained heightened potency through contrast with acoustic chaos. While the gesture ostensibly enacts suppression, its execution within FIFA's global media spectacle paradoxically amplified Ronaldo's message, consistent with Jaworski's (1993) argument that social expectations of vocalization intensify the communicative force of strategic silence. The gesture's simultaneous direction toward Ghanaian supporters and critical media demonstrates how

Figure 8

Metaphoric gesture of Cristiano Ronaldo's finger-to-lips



Gesture 9: Sarr's Eye-Covering Gesture: COVERING EYES IS WILLFUL IGNORANCE

Ismaila Sarr's eye-covering gesture during Senegal's victory over Ecuador exemplifies the conceptual metaphor **COVERING EYES IS WILLFUL IGNORANCE**. After scoring a penalty, Sarr covered his eyes with one hand while pointing a finger to his temple in a gesture widely interpreted as a critique of global media's disregard for ongoing atrocities in Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). The mapping operates through physical occlusion of vision (source domain) onto deliberate cognitive and ethical ignorance (target domain).

Figure 9

Metaphoric gesture of Ismaila Sarr's eye-covering while pointing a finger to his temple



The additional gun-like motion of the finger toward the temple intensified this metaphor by linking willful blindness to complicity in violence. The contrast between Sarr's dark gloves and the floodlit pitch heightened the visual salience of the eye-covering motion, while his central positioning on

the field ensured maximum visibility for broadcast cameras. This strategic use of FIFA's global platform reflects Jaworski's (1993) analysis of how institutional contexts can amplify the communicative force of deliberate communicative acts. Sarr's gesture exemplifies what Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) identify as the strategic deployment of embodied metaphor within institutional frameworks to advance counter-hegemonic meaning on behalf of marginalized communities.

Gesture 10: Messi's Bisht-Draping: CULTURAL ADORNMENT IS INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMIZATION

The closing ceremony featured a pivotal metaphoric gesture when Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani draped Lionel Messi in a traditional Arab bisht moments before he lifted the World Cup trophy. This act instantiated the conceptual metaphor CULTURAL ADORNMENT IS INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMIZATION, transforming a moment of athletic triumph into a statement of cultural recognition and symbolic integration. The bisht, a traditional Arab cloak typically worn by dignitaries and royalty at significant ceremonies, represents honor and status in Arab cultural tradition (Al Jazeera, 2022). By physically enveloping Messi in this garment, the Emir transformed FIFA's champion into a symbolically honored dignitary within Arab cultural frameworks, materializing abstract concepts of respect and celebration in visible form. The spatial context of the elevated award podium, the gold threading of the bisht creating visual harmony with the golden trophy, and the transparency of the garment, which signals exceptional quality in Arab tradition, all contributed layers of semiotic meaning consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) principles of multimodal discourse. The timing of the draping immediately before trophy-lifting ensured this cultural integration would define the tournament's most iconic visual moment. The divergent reception of this gesture across cultural contexts, ranging from Western criticism to Arab celebration, illustrates how the same embodied metaphor can be interpreted simultaneously as appropriation or honor depending on the interpretive framework applied (Gulf News, 2022).

Figure 10

Metaphoric gesture of Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani draping Lionel Messi with bisht



Discussion

The analysis of the ten gestures examined in this study reveals systematic patterns in how embodied metaphors operate within the highly regulated, globally broadcast, and culturally diverse environment of the FIFA World Cup. The findings can be organized around the four conceptual

categories identified in the study's analytical framework: vertical orientation, silence and sound, visual attention, and position or power mapping.

Within the vertical orientation category, gestures such as the Japanese bow (LOWERING IS RESPECT) and the Moroccan prostration (LOWERING IS GRATITUDE) demonstrate how the physical orientation of the body relative to a vertical axis systematically encodes abstract concepts of deference, humility, and reverence. These mappings are consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational observation that orientational metaphors grounded in bodily experience, particularly UP and DOWN, structure abstract conceptual domains across cultures. The bisht-draping gesture, in which Messi's horizontal elevation on the podium was transformed by the addition of traditional regalia, adds a further layer to vertical orientation by integrating cultural adornment into the spatial architecture of institutional recognition.

The silence and sound category encompasses some of the most politically charged gestures analyzed in this study. The Iranian team's silent protest, the German team's hand-to-mouth gesture, and Ronaldo's silencing gesture all operate through source domains involving the absence or suppression of sound mapped onto target domains of resistance, institutional censorship, and competitive control respectively. What unites these gestures is their exploitation of communicative expectation: each derives its force from the gap between what the institutional context demands, namely vocalization, nationalist expression, or celebratory noise, and what the athlete performs instead, consistent with Jaworski's (1993) analysis of how social expectations determine the meaning-potential of communicative acts. This exploitation of communicative expectation is itself a sophisticated multimodal strategy, demonstrating athletes' awareness of how institutional contexts shape the meaning-potential of their bodily acts.

The visual attention category is represented by Sarr's eye-covering gesture and Martinez's trophy gesture. Both involve deliberate manipulation of the visual field, either by blocking the act of seeing or by redirecting the gaze of spectators through transgressive repositioning of an institutional object. These gestures exploit the visual primacy of broadcast media, in which the camera's gaze becomes an amplifier for communicative acts that might otherwise be confined to smaller audiences. Sarr and Martinez each demonstrate sophisticated understanding of how broadcast infrastructure can be repurposed for communicative acts that challenge rather than reinforce dominant narratives, consistent with Forceville and Urios-Aparisi's (2009) framework of multimodal meaning construction within institutional contexts.

Finally, the position and power mapping category encompasses gestures such as Messi's ear-cupping, the hand-extension gesture at the opening ceremony, and the compound gestures of collective protest performed by national teams. These gestures all involve strategic manipulation of spatial positioning, directionality, and relational configuration to encode abstract concepts of dominance, solidarity, or inclusion. Messi's directional gesture toward a specific institutional opponent, and Freeman's downward hand-extension toward Al-Muftah, both demonstrate how the spatial relationship between gestural performer and recipient encodes power dynamics as effectively as any verbal expression.

Across all four categories, a consistent finding is that the institutional context of the FIFA World Cup both enables and constrains the communicative potential of metaphoric gestures. FIFA's regulations against explicit political expression, combined with the unprecedented global broadcast reach of the tournament, created a paradoxical environment in which embodied metaphor flourished precisely because verbal expression was circumscribed. This paradox reveals an important theoretical insight about the relationship between institutional power and communicative

agency: when dominant regulatory regimes attempt to suppress certain forms of expression, communicative actors often respond by developing alternative semiotic channels that circumvent those restrictions while still achieving their rhetorical objectives. The gestures analyzed in this study thus function not merely as substitutes for prohibited speech, but as strategic adaptations that exploit the affordances and constraints of the institutional environment in which they occur. This finding supports and extends Magrath's (2021) observation that athletes increasingly turn to bodily communication as a vehicle for advocacy within regulated sporting environments. It also points toward the growing scholarly and practical relevance of understanding

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that metaphoric gestures at the 2022 FIFA World Cup functioned as systematic, multimodal, and culturally embedded forms of visual communication, operating through identifiable source-target mappings consistent with Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The ten gestures analyzed each instantiated a distinct conceptual metaphor while simultaneously operating within a broader institutional and cultural context that shaped and amplified their communicative significance. The findings reveal four overarching patterns in how embodied metaphors are organized: through vertical orientation, sound and silence, visual attention, and the spatial encoding of power and position.

The study contributes to theoretical understanding of embodied metaphor and multimodal communication in at least three respects. First, it demonstrates that CMT can be productively extended beyond linguistic to gestural and visual semiotic data, enabling systematic analysis of how athletes communicate abstract concepts through bodily movement. Second, by integrating MDA into the analytical framework, the study shows how the institutional, spatial, and broadcast contexts of global sporting events constitute an essential dimension of gestural meaning, not merely a background against which gestures occur. Third, the study adds to a growing body of scholarship, including the work of Magrath (2021), Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009), and Kovecses (2020), that recognizes professional athletes as sophisticated communicative agents who

Future research might extend this framework to other global sporting events, including the Olympics, continental championships, and emerging competitive esports, to determine whether similar patterns of metaphoric gesture emerge across different institutional contexts and competitive structures. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of gestural repertoires across multiple tournament cycles would reveal how metaphoric conventions develop, stabilize, or transform in response to shifting political climates and institutional regulations. Cross-cultural reception studies examining how audiences in different geographic and cultural contexts interpret these gestural metaphors would illuminate the extent to which embodied metaphors function as universal communicative resources versus culturally contingent symbolic acts. Additionally, investigation of how digital media platforms, particularly social media, amplify, recontextualize, or transform the meanings of gestural moments through memes, viral clips, and commentary would contribute to understanding the mediated circulation of embodied communication. Computational approaches to gesture analysis that can process larger photographic and video datasets systematically would enable identification of patterns not readily apparent through qualitative case analysis alone. Furthermore, examining the gendered dimensions of metaphoric gestures in professional sports, particularly how female athletes deploy or are constrained in deploying similar gestural strategies, would advance understanding of the intersections between embodied metaphor, gender performance, and institutional power. The 2022 FIFA World Cup, with its unique convergence of political controversy, cultural diversity, and unprecedented global visibility,

represents a particularly rich archive for the ongoing study of gesture, metaphor, and visual communication in professional sports.

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