



Sports Mega-Events and Culture: The Vietnamese Cultural Representations in the 31st Sea Games Opening Ceremony

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Abstract

Sports mega-events or international sports events with large-scale audiences have offered fruitful opportunities for host nations to promote their national and cultural identities. The purpose of this research is to study the semiotic construction and representation of Vietnamese cultural identity through the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony (2021) and its link with the perspectives of the text producers towards those representations and relevant socio-cultural context. This research adopted a textual analysis of the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony. To enhance the credibility of the textual analysis, this study also utilized online videos and articles interviewing the text producers as secondary data sources. The socio-cultural context of Vietnam was also drawn to explain such representations. The results of this study revealed that the Vietnamese cultural representations in the ceremony not only highlighted the cultural identity of the nation but also constructed an inclusive vision of Vietnam's and other Southeast Asian countries' identity. In this way, the text producers deliberately selected and designed the cultural representations to relate Vietnam's culture to Southeast Asia sports games or Southeast Asian cultures. Based on the aim of the sports mega-event, the cultural meanings emphasized Vietnamese cultural identity, promoted sports spirit, and encouraged a solid connection among participants. Furthermore, the concept of national and regional symbols was very significant in constructing such international and intercultural content.

Keywords: Vietnamese Cultural Representations, Vietnamese Culture, Semiotics, SEA Games Opening Ceremony, Sports Events

Introduction

Sports mega-events such as the Football World Cup and the Olympic Games are highly mediatized to reach global audiences. They have become major tools for countries to display their singularity and to compete on the global stage. Hosting international sports can provide global recognition, which can be beneficial for strengthening the global profile



and increasing economic investment. In a study of the correlation between sport, media and culture, Boyle and Haynes (1999) mentioned media and modern sports as tools of power to transform our understanding of cultural and social aspects.

By analyzing Vietnamese cultural representations shown in the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony, which Vietnam hosted in 2022, this study aims to examine at how Vietnam embraced their cultural identity to global audiences through an international sports game. Vietnam, as an Asian country, has entered global integration for more than 15 years (Nguyen & Do, 2020) by taking steps towards trade liberalization, economy, regional cooperation, cultural exchange events, and so forth. To be more specific about this study topic, Vietnam hosting the 31st SEA Games has been praised by news media in terms of high spirits in sports, honesty, and hospitality (Aziz, 2022). Participating in international sports games has given Vietnam a chance to enhance cultural identity. With the support of media distribution and promotion, Vietnam gained the chance to strengthen its cultural image in a global setting. In the research “Vietnamese Cultural Identity in the Process of International Integration” Nguyen and Vu (2020) stated that Vietnam, has been experienced thousand years of building and defending country, has its own personality. International integration with the rapid spread of social networks nowadays provides Vietnam with numerous conditions to enrich its identity and continue its own cultural quintessence.

Hosting the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony gave Vietnam a valuable opportunity to present its cultural identity to international audiences. The ceremony was broadcast live on Vietnamese national television stations, including VTV1, VTV5, VTV6 and other countries’ telecast channels. The show was also officially streamed on *VTV The Thao* (a Vietnamese national sports YouTube channel with more than 1.6 million views) and other national and international YouTube channels. The total number of online audiences on YouTube reached nearly 4 million views.

It is proved directly or indirectly that sport events can be an influential vehicle for transnational corporations (Jackson, Andrews, & Scherer, 2005) and be a tool for countries showing political, economic power (Ludvigsen, Rookwood, & Parnell, 2022). Even though sports events and their ability to present a nation’s culture have attracted scholarly attention for two decades, these studies focused on sports events in Western countries such as FIFA World Cup, The UEFA European Football Championship, London Olympics Games, etc. The studies about Asia, especially Southeast Asia countries’ sport competitions, are still limited. In terms of culture, Asia is considered the cradle of humanity’s unique civilizations (Vietnam Tourism, 2013). Hence, it is necessary to research a country in Southeast Asia to fill the gap. As a developing country in Southeast Asia and



the host of the recent SEA Games, Vietnam has a good opportunity to promote its cultural identity to both local and international audiences. It is interesting to study how Vietnam's culture has been portrayed in this event.

Objectives

The research project was conducted with two main research objectives:

1. To analyze how the semiotic elements of the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony reflect Vietnamese cultural representation.
2. To examine the perspectives of the text producers towards Vietnamese cultural representations through the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony.

Literature, Theories, and Conceptual Framework

Sports Mega-events and its Function in a Nation's Cultural Representations

Researchers claimed that mega-sport events provide host nations with a universally legitimate way to present and promote their national identities and cultures on a global scale as pointed out by Brownell (1995); Maguire (1999); Roche (2000) (as cited in Dolles & Soderman, 2008). Nations and states represented through international sporting competitions conjure a shared sense of awe-feeling among the spectators (Dolles & Soderman, 2008).

The Social Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann (1996 as cited in Lekngam, 2019, p.114) contended that "reality is socially constructed". Our backgrounds and beliefs influence how we perceive the world. Leeds-Hurwitz (2009, as cited in Lekngam, 2019, p.115) explained that people generate the meaning of a social world through a variety of communication modes, including words and/or actions. From the perspectives of sociology and communication, audiences base their conventional experience on producing meanings of the "real" world. In this study, to understand Vietnamese representation as a social construct, the researcher investigated the meanings of Vietnamese cultural elements constructed and represented in the SEA Games Opening Ceremony and how the show was mediatized as part of the semiotics of Vietnamese cultural representations and construction.

Semiotics Theory and National Symbols

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols which we use to communicate and how they are used, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary. Ferdinand de Saussure's lectures, edited by Meisel and Saussy (2011), explained that a *sign* consists of a *signifier* and a *signified*. The *signifier* is the *sign's* image as we can perceive it. The *signified* is the mental concept that it refers to. The mental concept is broadly common to all members of the same culture who share the same language.



Jandt (2007) confirmed that *symbols* can be used to communicate across language barriers. Regarding the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony, the study of Vietnamese cultural presentation combines Cultural Semiotics and Theater Semiotics. Wiltgren (2014) stated that visual symbols such as flags and maps reproduce nationalism and serve as identity markers. *National symbols* are the *signifiers* of what individuals interpret that they have in common (the *signifieds*). Through *national symbols*, citizens can convey their sense of pride and love to national representation (Wiltgren, 2014).

Vietnamese Cultural Elements Model

Due to its geographical position, Vietnam has experienced a long cultural, historical and geopolitical process of development. This process has allowed Vietnam to expose themselves to different cultures from China, India, France and other Western countries. Tran (2006, p.278), a Vietnamese culture researcher, stated that Vietnam's cultural history has seen cultures pass by, but its own cultural identity still exists. On the other hand, Vietnamese culture is an adaptation to natural changes and defense of national territory, clearly shown through Wet Rice agriculture and the village structure with the presence of 54 ethnic groups. Vietnam's cultural is both diverse and unified because of the above factors. Therefore, the division of Vietnamese cultural elements by Tran (2006) is based on diverse geopolitical, historical, and natural factors to create 15 elements. Tran (2006, p. 73) stressed that “culture as a system constituted from various elements”. Each element conveys the common but also unique characteristics of its own. The Vietnamese cultural model proposed by Tran (2006, p.73) consists of 15 elements: *Belief and Religion, Language, Performance Arts, Architecture, Sign and Symbol, Mass media, Literature, Cinematic and Photographic, Lifestyle, Fine Arts, Customs, Music, Festivals, Vietnamese theatre* (folk musical, classical drama, role-play, etc.), and *Handicrafts*. Based on this model, the representation of Vietnamese culture in the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony will be categorized.

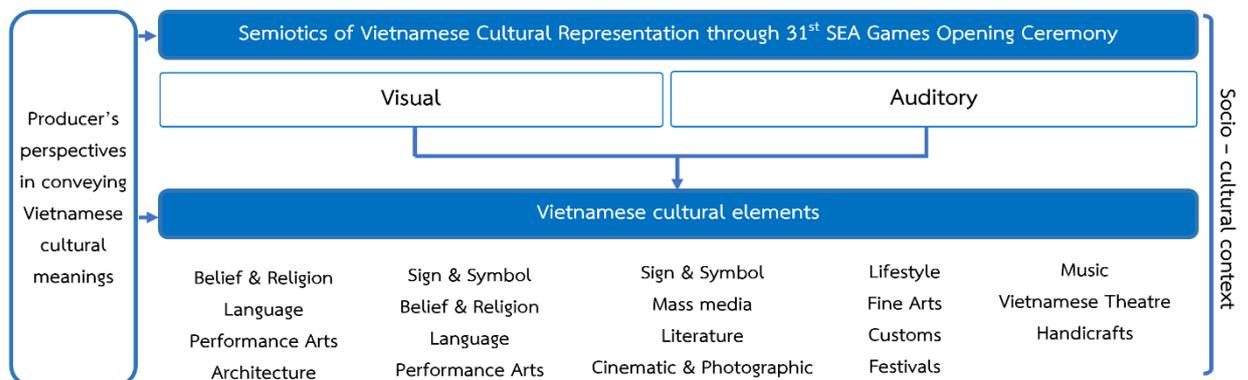


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the study



Research Methodology

This qualitative research adopted a textual analysis of the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony, using the recorded video of the ceremony published on VTV The Thao as a primary data sample. Textual analysis was adopted in this study to examine the content and its meanings and cultural elements embedded in the text. It is a way of approaching media texts to understand their meanings (Lekngam, 2019). This is to find out how Vietnamese cultural representations are reflected by semiotic elements in the show.

To enhance the credibility of textual analysis, this study uses multiple sources of data or methods to validate the findings. The researcher used YouTube videos and articles interviewing the text producers as secondary data sources. Purposive sampling was conducted to select samples for secondary data collection. The text producers interviewed included the art director Tran Ly Ly, the show producer/art director Hoang Cong Cuong, the composer of the SEA Games song, the hosts (MC) and the artist who invented the SEA Games mascot. The research procedure involves 3 phases of dealing with (1) primary data (the media texts of the show), (2) secondary data (the interview texts), and (3) contextualization of data to find a link between the data and relevant socio-cultural context. In the first and second phases, thematic analysis was conducted to analyze semiotic elements and cultural meanings, Vietnamese cultural categories, and text producers' perspectives in constructing and representing such cultural meanings.

Results

The Semiotic elements of Vietnamese cultural representations in the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony

The textual analysis of the media texts reveals six semiotics groups and four core concepts of Vietnamese cultural representations in the ceremony.

Semiotic Groups of Vietnamese cultural representations

The research results reveal three modes of communication as a tool that carries Vietnamese cultural meanings. These include the *Visual mode* (9 elements): images and graphics, gestures, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, accessory, lighting, and props; the *Auditory mode* (2 elements): music and sound effects; and the *Linguistic mode* (3 elements): written words, lyrics, and spoken words. Through the three modes of communication, there are 6 semiotic themes of Vietnamese representations in the 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony. These include *visual nature and history settings, performers, national symbols, national elite members, folk arts, and the Vietnamese language*.



- 1) *The Visual Settings* appear as the most obvious and frequent semiotic element of the show. The settings depict Vietnam's natural geographic environment and its cultural and historical length. Designed images and AR graphics projected by 3D Mapping technology are used throughout the show to build the visual settings. Along with that, settings are supported by lighting effects and props.



Figure 2: A setting of Vietnamese history presented by the Golden Dragon as a historical symbol in gold and brown color.



Figure 3: Following the historical setting (as shown in Figure 1) is a “modernized” setting which is colored blue and pink. It displays logos of all SEA Games through years and introduce the Games taking place (the 31st SEA Games 2021 in Vietnam).

- 2) As an important part of visual settings, the *Performers* are separated into another group as it includes a wide range of visual semiotic elements (gestures, movements, makeup, hairstyle, costumes, and accessories). Vietnamese performers representing a modernized appearance of traditionality indicate that Vietnam encounters external cultural variants but still preserves its own cultural identities.



Figure 4: Traditional Conical Hats and national costume *Ao Dai* were newly designed, depicting a younger and hybrid version of Vietnam’s culture.

3) *National symbols* in the show function as national identities of Vietnam. Vietnam’s national symbols are shown by many semiotic elements (images, graphics, the performers’ movements and props, the performers’ costumes, the mascot, etc.). The national symbols, with variety and continuous repetition, declare the pride of Vietnam in its culture: We have our own uniqueness.



Figure 5: A representation of Vietnam’s national flag in the show

4) *National elite members* include national leaders, national sports teams and local spectators. The inclusion of gestures, costumes, and accessories to become the “red combination” (the color of the Vietnamese national flag) conveys cultural meanings for Vietnam. In this ceremony, the elite members present Vietnamese people’s pride of their solidarity.





Figure 6-7-8-9: Representations of the sport team, the spectators and national leaders who waved national flags or wear red items.

5) Folk arts are another representation of Vietnam’s identities in the show’s cultural hybridization. The arts are illustrated by images, graphics, and music. An interesting finding is that Vietnam attempts to relate to regional similarities to call for union. This finding contributes to an intercultural communication tool applied to international events.



Figure 10: Folk Dong Ho paintings present cultures of 11 Southeast Asia nations.



Figure 11: The artist playing Bamboo Flute as a part of Bamboo circus performance.

- 6) Finally, the *Vietnamese language* presented by written texts, song lyrics and spoken words are combined to portray a resilient and friendly Vietnam. Vietnamese texts take over in the show duration (longer than English), especially in speeches and art forms of languages such as poems and songs.

Core concepts of Vietnamese cultural representations

The show conveys the key message “*For a stronger Southeast Asia*”, which involves political aims. This key message is established by four key cultural concepts. Since it is a sports mega-event, all cultural concepts aim to not only Vietnam but all Southeast Asia cultures as an inclusive identity. These include *The Connection with Water, A Resilient Vietnam, Hospitality for Peace, and A stronger Southeast Asia*.

- 1) The first concept is the exclusive trait in Vietnam’s culture: *the connection with water in every aspect of life*. Due to the common geographic environment in the region, Water plays a crucial role in Southeast Asia cultures as well. This sends a political message: Similar cultures provide us with conditions to cooperate.



Figure 12-13: Wet Rice Civilization and the Lotus as representations of the aquatic link with Vietnamese and Southeast Asia cultures.



- 2) The second concept declares *a strong, resilient, and independent Vietnam* by presenting the *Bronze Drum* which dates back from the 1st millennium BC and the historical golden Dragon and from *Lý Dynasty* (1009 - 1054 and 1054 - 1225) in Vietnam history. Along with showing historical pride of Vietnam, this concept encourages sports spirit (strength, fair play, conquering challenges) by stressing on *Vovinam* – a traditional martial arts of Vietnam. Furthermore, this concept urges solidarity and unity among Southeast Asia nations by using the images of *Lotus* or *Bamboo* as common cultural representations in this area.



Figure 14: The augmented reality image of Bronze Dum displayed in the show.



Figure 15: The 31st SEA Games logo, rises from the Lotus Pond, is the metaphor of peace and victory podium, which is Vietnam's message to friends in the region.

- 3) The third concept presents *hospitality*, showing the host country's warm greeting to all Southeast Asia countries who visit Vietnam and participate in the games. Also, this concept is indicated by the way Vietnam familiarizes itself with Southeast Asia cultures through 11 folk paintings presenting identities of



all 11 countries (as shown in Figure 9).

- 4) The fourth concept conveys the message of *a stronger Southeast Asia* through the representations of the Sea Games mascot *Sao la, Lotus, the Sea and Fire* which urge sports spirits for competition in Southeast Asia cultures.



Figure 16: The fishermen gather as a big group sailing to the sea, one of Vietnamese traditional marine works, is a metaphor for common strength of Southeast Asia.

Text producers' purposes for Vietnamese cultural representations

By organizing the 31st SEA Games, the text producers considered economic, social, and technological issues when coming up with cultural ideas. One of the issues which affect the process of implementing Vietnamese representations in the show is cultural preservation. The revival of Vietnam's situation post-COVID is also mentioned by the producers as a challenge. Furthermore, insufficient technological supplies require a cautious selection of cultural representations. Hence, presenting a developing, strong, but friendly Vietnam is necessary in this situation because it can strengthen the thoughts of other nations about Vietnam.

The key message of this SEA Games is "For a stronger Southeast Asia", which forces the text producers to convey it in all performances and rituals of the ceremony. Since the SEA Games is an international event, messages about sport spirits and regional cooperation must be included. Specifically:

- Vietnamese cultural representations selected must build narratives for Vietnam, sports spirits and Southeast Asia, which fulfill the requirements of the governments and the text producers in the situation of the 31st SEA Games.
- The cultural representations serve multi-communicative purposes: (1) to show the pride in Vietnam in its "cultural wealth", (2) to show Vietnam's confidence to grow in globalization, (3) to imply political messages for cooperation amongst all Southeast Asia countries through sports spirits, (4) to enhance Vietnamese



cultural promotion and preservation.

- The text producers target both local and international audiences. Hence, they must consider the link between Vietnam's and Southeast Asian cultures.

To conclude, cultural representations depicted in this show are utilized to promote Vietnam's cultural identity. However, they are not compulsorily exclusive to Vietnam. The connection between Vietnamese culture and Southeast Asian culture is deliberately considered and represented by the text producers so that the show is a source of promoting international relations and at the same time foregrounding Vietnam's cultural identity representation.

Furthermore, cultural inclusion in such events can create a shared sense of awe-feeling among all participants. This serves the ultimate political aims of the SEA Games: Solidarity and Unity. For example, Vietnamese cultural representations presented in the ceremony are familiar to Asian or Southeast Asian cultures (such as Bamboo, Lotus, the Fishermen, etc.). In some cases, they are designed intentionally to relate Vietnam's culture to Southeast Asia sports games or Southeast Asia cultures (such as 11 Dong Ho Paintings depicting 11 Southeast Asia cultural identities; Vietnamese women wearing *Ao Dai* and conical hats create a "Journey to Vietnam" to welcome international friends).

Conclusions and Discussion

From the results, Vietnamese cultural representations are intentionally constructed so that they can produce common feelings and ideological meanings of a united SEA community. However, differences of perception take place between audiences due to their different cultural backgrounds. For example, the "reality" of the Wet Rice Civilization of a Vietnamese and Thai audience might be different.

In terms of semiotics, the cultural meaning production in this ceremony is not directly generated from a particular sign but from different *semiotic groups* of cultural representations as a whole system. Throughout the show, *national symbols* are used repeatedly and continuously under various representations. A Vietnamese national symbol such as Lotus can induce a sense of harmony among both local and international audiences as it is a common cultural symbol in the region. It should be aware that national symbols can be presented under different visual or audio modes to produce universal meanings. For example, in the show, "the yellow star" on the national flag implies "victory" or "glory" creating a sense of winning in sports. Hence, to strengthen sports values (which result in we-feeling) in a global event, symbols that carry both national and universal meanings (*regional symbols*) should be considered to link the host nation with other cultures as parts of a community. *National symbols* (of the host country) can conjure



a shared of we-feeling among local spectators, but *regional symbols* are supportive tools for strengthening international empathy and rapport.

In this 31st SEA Games Opening Ceremony, *Vietnamese lifestyle* and *History* are expected to be the main inspirations of the text producers. However, they considered issues including nation's economy, politics, geography and cultural differences and similarities to generate cultural meanings. Those aspects should also be included in the interpretation of any culture in global situations.

In terms of limitations, this study's qualitative method may reflect the researcher's own biases and assumptions, considering these might have influenced the analysis. However, the researcher adopts triangulation to enhance the validity and reliability of the results. During the analysis, it is expected that semiotic elements in the show would directly reflect Vietnamese cultural representations. In fact, the large number of semiotic elements generated based on the Vietnamese cultural model makes the interpretation process more complex. The researcher must transfer the semiotic system into bigger groups to find out which kind of Vietnamese cultural representations they present. In addition, due to the complex communicative purposes of the show, various aspects of history, geography, differences, and similarities of cultures are included in the interpretation to figure out the key messages that the text producers attempt to convey through the show.

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