Article

The Twitter Following For the Beijing Winter Olympics and the Russian–Chinese Fans' Alliance: A Social Network Analysis

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Abstract
The current study examines the extent to which mega sport events play a role in connecting people from different countries, using the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as its case study. The analysis examines social connection (on Twitter) between Chinese and Russians and whether these connections are more likely to occur among the followers of the @Beijing2022 Twitter account, if compared with Twitter users in these countries who do not follow this account. The choice of the Russians and the Chinese also stems from their countries' united front against those Western countries whose diplomats boycotted the games. The analysis reveals that, in cases where two people follow @Beijing2022, the likelihood of there being a connection between them increases by 8%, as compared with those people who do not follow this account, while controlling for other relevant variables. The findings indicate that mega sport events which take place under a boycott have the ability to be enhancers of international social connections.

Keywords
Sino-Russian relations, boycott, Beijing 2022, mega events

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Introduction

At the outset of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the United States announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Games, precluding government officials from attending the games due to the alleged genocide of the *Uyghurs*, Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang (Pereira, 2022). The diplomatic boycott decision was soon followed by Australia, Britain, and Canada (Mather, 2022). In response, the boycott was denounced by Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, and China's leader, Xi Jinping, on the grounds of the politicization of the Olympic games, noting that countries should not mix politics and sport (Reuters, 2022). Arguably, the incident marks one of the most severe political steps since the mutual mass boycott of the summer Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980 by the United States as a protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), and the subsequent Eastern bloc boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games by the Eastern bloc (*The Guardian*, 2022). The question remains as to whether the political boycott was reflected in the relationships between sport fans who, following the political cues of leaders, mirrored the political tension or, alternatively, whether those fans who follow trends reflect an a-political following of the Beijing Winter Olympics, thus disregarding politics.

Accordingly, this study takes a social network analysis (SNA) approach to examining the networks of followers of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games 2022 among Chinese and Russian Twitter members to understand whether, and to what extent, they mirrored the political tension. The SNA of the Twitter following allows the highlighting of there being a *likelihood of a connection between two people from China and Russia who follow @Beijing2022, versus people who do not follow this account, while controlling for the other relevant variables.* In addition, the SNA will allow the evaluation of these bonds on a large scale, including the structures of the relationships among individuals and groups, and how these relationships affect network processes (Hayat & Mo, 2015).

The study makes several unique contributions to studies of the politicization of sport, as well as to studies of mega sport events. First, by examining the network structure using the SNA tool, the study will contribute toward advancing the SNA approach research method, a strategy which has been described by some as an emerging paradigm in sports' research (Hambrick et al., 2019; Wäsche et al., 2017). Our study, then, will contribute to its development as a central research approach to mega sport events and their politicization. Second, whereas the great majority of the studies of sport, from the SNA perspective, have examined the structure of sports teams (Duch et al., 2010; Kooij et al., 2009) or organizations (Babiak, 2007; Wäsche & Woll, 2010), our analysis will add a unique perspective on the issue from the angle of the fans' network structure. Finally, whereas the great majority of studies on the issues associated with sport and politics have been conducted in relation to the Summer Olympic Games (Grancay & Dudas, 2018; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019) and the World Cup (Grix et al., 2019; Samuel-Azran et al., 2018), our analysis will contribute to the less-studied Winter Olympic Games.

Sport and Politics: To What Extent Do Mega Events Reflect Global Unity?

The question regarding the extent to which the sports realm is blind to politics, rather than being an extension of it, has been central for decades (Grix, 2013; Krüger & Murray, 2010). Naturally, the main mega sport events—the World Cup and the Summer Olympic Games—are also the most studied, with the Olympic Games providing the most cases of political controversy. The first Olympic Games, in Athens, in 1896, had already been characterized by refusals from Germany and France, who were still rivals following the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), to join the games, although the two countries eventually agreed (Espy, 1981). Famously, the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games were considered to be a political event, with the Nazi regime's attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Arian athletes versus Jesse Owens' winning four gold medals, which challenged Hitler's racist beliefs (Klapp, 1949). Next, Germany and Japan were banned from the 1948 London Games following their loss of the Second World War. In the 1956 Melbourne Games, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq boycotted the games following the Suez Crisis. In addition, the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland pulled out of the Games following Russia's invasion of Hungary and, for some, a highly tense water polo game between Russia and Hungary during the games reflected an extension of the contemporary political conflict (Murray & Hay, 2013). During the 1968 Mexico City Games, the Mexican police killed more than 200 of those who were protesting against the games in what is known as the Tlatelolco Massacre, due to protests regarding the investment of the government in the Olympics rather than in social welfare programs (Borden, 2005). In Munich, 1972, the Israeli Olympic team massacre by Palestinian terrorists during the Summer Olympics overshadowed the sports value of the games (Diffrient, 2008). In 1976, several African countries boycotted the games in protest against the participation of New Zealand, whose national Rugby team visited South Africa, despite its apartheid policies and their political consequences shortly before the games (Nauright, 1993). In 1980 and 1984, the Cold War contributed to reciprocal US-led and USSR-led boycotts of the Olympic games in Moscow in 1980, and Los Angeles in 1984, respectively (Sarantakes, 2009). Accordingly, it is not surprising that an analysis of politics throughout the Summer Olympic games has pointed to a trend toward persistent rising tensions, politicization, and political protests surrounding the games (Cottrell & Nelson, 2011).

In the World Cup arena, also, the sport-politics nexus has often been expressed in the nature of the soccer games themselves, between rival nations, as well as in the tendencies shown by fandom. Some famous examples include the Italy–France game during the 1938 World Cup in France (Dietschy, 2014), the Honduras versus El Salvador matches in 1969, which were played to qualify for the 1970 FIFA World Cup, which took place concurrently with the mounting tension over El Salvador and which is thus famously known as the Football War (Cable, 1969). Other subsequent examples include the East versus West Germany game during the 1974 World Cup (Merkel, 1999), and the United States versus Iran match during the 1998 World Cup (Chehabi, 2001). A 2014 study of the fandom tendencies before the World Cup illustrate the

trend, revealing that Greeks rooted against the German team, arguably on the grounds of Greek resentment toward Germany's demands that Greece return the loans that had been given to them by Germany, as part of the EU block, with the price of Greece's bankruptcy, Mexicans named the United States as the least favorite team, arguably on the grounds of border tensions, and Japanese fans root against South Korea and vice versa, arguably on the grounds of territorial claims and remaining tensions relating to the Second World War (Aisch et al., 2014).

While the politics-sport nexus in evident, some hold the view that, in the era of globalization, in contrast to the Cold War and World War eras, the interdependency between cultures and nations means that sport, rather than nationalism, is at center stage in the sports realm. According to Galily (2009), the fact that viewers worldwide are watching local leagues via satellite television leads to there being an emphasis on the love of sport, and fandom relates to players and teams rather than to nations. For example, teams such as Bayern München in Germany, Barcelona and Real Madrid in Spain, Juventus in Italy and Manchester City, Manchester United and Liverpool in England, are, in practice, global teams with global fans. Indeed, Parks (2008) found that the following for the UEFA European Championship reflects unity based on teams, rather than on nationality, across Europe.

In addition, Giulianotti and Robertson (2012; see also Black, 2007) argue that the hosts of mega sport events increasingly emphasize the equality between nations, as illustrated in the opening ceremonies, which put emphasis on unity and multiculturalism throughout the games. Kersting (2007) argues that, during the games themselves, the value of sportsmanship overtakes those of origin, color, gender, or race. To illustrate this argument, we might consider that the same global fandom survey, conducted before the 2014 World Cup, found that dislike for the German team was minimal in Europe, in contrast to the decades-long enmity against the German team on the grounds of the two world wars (Aisch et al., 2014). Indeed, a study in Israel also revealed that the German team gained a massive following and they were rooted for by Israeli soccer fans throughout the 2014 World Cup, despite the memory of the Holocaust (Samuel-Azran et al., 2016). Finally, Bandyopadhyay (2008) argues that one of the main conflict resolution realms for the India and Pakistan tension is cricket matches, where people from both nations have a unique opportunity to meet on a sport interest basis and to communicate with each other with respect to the sports game, regardless of the ongoing national tensions between the countries.

Winter Olympics and Politics

In comparison to the ample studies of the Summer Olympic Games and politics, literature about the politicization of the Winter Games is scarcer, perhaps because of their dramatically lower profile in most countries, and the fact that fewer countries participate in the games. However, the Winter Games still involve politics and revolve around political tensions. To take examples from the 21st century alone, consider that the 2002 Salt Lake City games were taking place a few months after the September 11th terrorist attacks, and they were standing in the shadow of the attacks, constantly

reminding viewers and attendees about the September 11th events (Butterworth, 2009). The Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games were overshadowed, and remembered by many, due to the plan to build the venues over unceded indigenous land, and the protests of indigenous groups in Canada (Boykoff, 2011). Next, the 2014 Sochi Games, in Russia, were standing in the shadow of Putin's 2013 Bill that legislated for fines being given to people promoting homosexual relationships, which caused Coca Cola to withdraw its sponsorship of the games (Davidson & McDonald, 2018). Next, in 2018, the games were hosted in South Korea, in PyeongChang, where the official website of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games posted a world map without the Japanese archipelago (Lee & Tan, 2021), reflecting the ongoing tension between the countries. Another political matter during these games was the exclusion of the Russian team, due to a ban by the Olympic Committee after conclusive evidence that Russia was systematically doping its athletes.

However, the Pyeong Chang Games were also setting an example for mega sport events being used as a platform for conflict resolution and unity, as North Korea surprisingly announced its participation a month before the Games (Rowe, 2019). Indeed, a recent analysis reveals that, accordingly, the international media covered the 2018 Winter Olympics as the "Peace Games," utilizing a mega sports event for the promotion of world peace (English & Murray, 2022). Indeed, due to the North Korean participation in the PyeongChang Olympics, the games were often lauded as promoting regional connectivity more than any other sport event in recent history (Cho, 2022). The combined analyses of the Pyeong Chang Games, illustrating the multi-dimensional political effects of mega sport events and the need to continue to address both the opportunities for global unity and the extension of political tensions taking place during these mega sport events. This emphasizes the need to continue examining sport games, in general, and mega sport events, in particular, as a platform for global unity, as against being an extension of political conflicts, which is also the aim of this study.

Sino-Russian Relations and the Sporting Arena

According to Lukin (2021), the contemporary quasi-alliance between Moscow and Beijing is more than two decades old. The Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" was proclaimed in April 1996, as the mid-1990s marked a watershed, in both Russia and China's foreign policies. Moscow felt harsh disappointment, and even anger, with the West, and perceived itself as being treated as a defeated adversary that could, at best, be a junior partner in the US-dominated order. At the same time, Beijing was subjected to the humiliation of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which demonstrated China's impotence vis-à-vis the American superpower.

Indeed, China and Russia are separately facing US efforts to form alliances and to find new partner countries that will oppose the more aggressive foreign policies that the two countries present in parts of the world that they consider to be important, under their influence. The US encourages Japan, Australia, India, and other countries in the region, to curb Beijing, as it seeks to strengthen NATO and other European partners against Russia's new aspirations to influence.

As the second largest economy in the world, and a huge importer of oil and gas, today, China is already a major buyer of Russian energy and is investing in the Russian economy. Beijing could decide to strengthen this role, and thus to help Russia to face US sanctions by purchasing more energy resources, supplying computer processors and other goods, if the US imposes restrictions on exports, and China can also give Russia bigger loans.

Two recently completed bridges across the Amur River—one for rail traffic and the other for vehicles—symbolize Russia's growing closeness to China. It is remarkable that, for centuries, the Amur was the main boundary between Russia and China, but there was not a single permanent bridge across this border river. China's economic decoupling from the United States (Wang, 2019) is likely to increase Beijing's long-term interest in Russian commodities (Lukin, 2021).

In addition, China's readiness to be a protective battery for the Russians rose after Russia's previous invasion of Ukraine in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and stirred up a revolt among pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. This move led to Western sanctions, costing Russia tens of billions of dollars, and encouraged Moscow and Beijing to sign a long-delayed agreement to supply the Chinese with natural Russian gas.

Almost 8 years later, China is Russia's largest trading partner, and trade between the two countries peaked at $147 billion last year. Putin has said that he expects that amount to rise to $200 billion this year. A railway over a bridge over a supposed river in Siberia, which was completed last year, will help with the physical passage between the two countries.

Since the annexation of the Crimea, Beijing's ability to soften the blow caused by sanctions has strengthened, as the two countries have consistently reduced the use of the dollar in their bilateral trade relations. Their trade ties have also expanded, reaching a peak of more than $145 billion in 2021, reflecting annual double-digit growth.

Russia's ability to take the sting out of sanctions by increasing the number of agreements in other currencies has been reflected in a series of energy agreements that it has recently concluded with China. These agreements have bypassed the dollar-based financial system through loans and credit that have been negotiated in yuan. When Putin met with Xi in Beijing in 2021, Russian Gazprom and Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 25-year agreement on a new gas supply route, the Power of Siberia Pipeline, which was launched in 2019, and which is expected to reach full capacity in 2025. Rosneft, Russia's leading oil producer, and China's leading exporter, which is responsible for 7% of the country's annual demands, reached agreements in 2021, with CNPC, to supply 100 million tons of oil to China via Kazakhstan, over a decade. Russia and China are also promoting a third gas pipeline, through Mongolia, with their analysts agreeing to sign an agreement by the end of the 2022.

According to Kogan (2021), at the end of June 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Moscow published an update about a video call between the presidents of the countries, which took place on June 28, 2021. In the conversation, Presidents Xi and Putin agreed on the extension of the agreement "for good neighborliness and friendly cooperation," and this agreement was signed on July 16th, 2001. The contents of the new agreement between the countries are in line with Putin's doctrine, as it emerges from

the principles of Russia's National Security Strategy document, which was published in early July 2021. Among the key points where the agreement and strategy go hand in hand is a repetition of the multipolar world narrative, which has been known about from Putin's statements for years, as a counterweight to the unipolar world, which the United States promotes, and this emerges from the Russian narrative. Another issue on which the agreement and strategy are coordinated is the directing of Russia's cooperation efforts with China. At this point, it is interesting to note that, according to the wording of the original 2001 agreement, its extension is automatic, unless the parties have notified that it will not be extended a year before it expires. It thus appears that there was no need for an extension agreement to be valid in any case. It is possible that the ceremonial aspect of the renewal of the agreement stems from the needs of the parties to have a significant milestone that can be presented to their home audiences. In early July 2021, China marked 100 years since the founding of the Communist Party, and it is possible that the renewal of the strategic agreement with its great neighbor came about to meet a Chinese need for a significant milestone ahead of the centenary celebrations. This insight is reinforced by the fact that the (virtual) meeting date between the leaders and the date of the announcement of the renewal of the agreement were adjusted to meet those of the celebrations, as the anniversary of the signing of the original agreement falls on July 16th, 2021, more than 2 weeks after its renewal, a renewal which was not required. The fact is that the publication of the renewal of the agreement in the Russian media also echoed widespread publicity from China's embassies around the world and in the Chinese media, while the Russian side mainly cited these sources.

As for sport, according to Gao (2021), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI—abbreviation of "the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road") is China's new exploration and innovation policy, which includes (among other initiatives) proposals to build a transparent and open sports communication platform, thereby constructing a win–win mode for international cooperation. It is beneficial to develop communication and cooperation between China and all of the countries along the Belt and Road route, and to encourage a concerted global effort to construct an international community with a shared future. The BRI has not only intensified intercommunication between China and Russia, but has also brought new opportunities and challenges for cultural communication across borders. China and Russia have maintained close contact through extensive non-governmental sports activities since 1992. Friendly matches between their peoples, schools, and the enterprises of the two countries are held frequently. From football, volleyball, and basketball to badminton, swimming, and martial arts, there are countless non-governmental sports communication activities between the two countries. Undeniably, China and Russia hold similar international strategic intentions and concepts. Cultural exchange and communication, therefore, are regarded as having the potential to provide the basis for in-depth and long-term cooperation between China and Russia, with sports communication playing an integral role in this process. Currently, the development of global capitalism and consumer culture (particularly social networks) incorporates a "new sports order," with sport becoming an important carrier of political, economic, cultural, scientific, and technological ideas and development (Gao, 2021, p. 1829).

Method

Social network ties represent various types of relationships, including collaboration, kinship, shared ideologies, economic exchange, and communications. SNA focuses on the structure of the relationships among units (nodes), whether these are individuals, groups, or organizations, and on how these relationships affect network processes (Hayat & Mo, 2015). The basic premises underlying SNA are that (1) nodes and their actions are interdependent with their relational structure, and nodes are not viewed as being independent autonomous units; (2) links between nodes are channels for the flow, or exchange, of material or non-material resources; (3) a network is an environment that provides incentives and opportunities for, or constraints on, individual action; and (4) a network represents patterns of ties between individual nodes that persist over time (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). For this paper, we conducted an ego network analysis. Ego network analysis deals with the relationships that exist from the perspective of a particular node, which is referred to as an "ego" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Ego networks consist of a single actor (the ego) together with those actors to which they are connected (alters) and all the links among those alters. These networks are also known as neighborhood networks, or first-order neighborhoods of egos (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

The primary data source that is used in this article is a sample of dyads (i.e., a group of two people, the smallest possible social group) of geocoded Twitter accounts connected by a "follow" relation. To assemble this set of dyads, we collected the ego networks of a sample of 50,000 Twitter users who were following Beijing 2022 (@ Beijing2022). In addition, we sampled 50,000 Twitter users who do not follow @ Beijing2022, through stratified random samplings. Strata were defined according to the geographic distribution of the Twitter users who followed (@Beijing2022; as well as their language preferences. For each ego, we coded in our database whether he or she follows (@Beijing2022 (which was coded as either "yes" or "no").

Since our sample of egos included a relatively small number of users who were picked from among hundreds of millions of user accounts, the sampled egos were predominantly connected to users outside our sample. For this reason, we did not attempt to analyze the ties between the sampled egos, and, instead, we sampled an additional user (an alter); for each ego, we randomly drew an account from amongst those that were followed by the ego. We then coded the locations of both the egos and the alters. We also collected additional data about both the ego and the alter. For both the ego and the alter, we coded their user interface language (as a proxy for the language that they speak).

We collected the data using a dedicated scraping tool, which was written by the authors specifically for this project, and which was designed to query Twitter's streaming application programming interface (API). API is a set of instructions and protocols that allow users to access a web-based software application. Twitter's streaming API (https://dev.twitter.com/) offers access to new public Twitter messages and their associated "metadata," such as the user who posted them, date, location, language, and so forth (Rossi & Giglietto, 2016), as soon as the data are available. Notably, there is no guarantee that the API captures all of the tweets that match the tracking criteria:

temporary interruptions may cause gaps in transmission that even a secondary check through the search API cannot fill. In line with previous work on Twitter API data collection (e.g., Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013), we thus introduced a small margin of error into our captured data and treated the resulting datasets as close approximations, rather than as completely exhaustive representations of the data described above.

Measures

We extracted geo-location data (for both ego and alter) from the data collected; we had the latitude and longitude coordinates for each ego and alter in our sample, based on their recent tweets. We were only able to collect this data for content posted with global positioning system-enabled devices. We then converted this extracted geo-location data from latitude/longitude coordinate format into the country in which the latitude/longitude exists, using the Google Maps Geocoding API. This enabled us to associate both the ego and the alter with a country of residence. We also used the Google Maps API to calculate the distance (in kilometers) between the ego and the alter.

As discussed above, to investigate the effect of language preferences on Twitter ties, for both the ego and the alter, we coded their user interface language (as a proxy for the language they speak). The language variable was coded as 1, if both ego and alter had the same language settings, and as 0, if they did not have the same settings.

To investigate the effect of the ease of travel on Twitter ties, we obtained a dataset showing the number of direct flights between countries. We found the number of flights for each dyad; that is, we had data regarding the number of flights available between the country in which the ego resided and the country in which the alter resided. To acquire these data, we used the database OpenFlights,[1] a commonly used source for assessing flight frequencies between countries (e.g., García-Gavilanes et al., 2014; Krueger et al., 2016). The database offers data about 5,497 airports (see Figure 1) and 9,468 airlines, and a Route Mapper that contains all the routes between the 5,497 airports (see Figure 2).

Analysis

We used three logistic regressions to study the hypothesized influence of (1) distance, (2) the number of flights between destinations, (3) the language similarity, and whether the ego (4) follows @Beijing2022, on the likelihood of the existence of a dyadic Twitter tie between people residing in different countries (see Figure 3). We first examined whether the (1) distance, (2) number of flights and (3) language similarity affect the likelihood of the existence of a dyadic Twitter tie between people residing in different countries (Model 1). Then, for the purpose of investigating the link between following @Beijing2022 and the likelihood of the existence of a dyadic Twitter tie between people residing in different countries, we studied a regression model in which we add the "follows @Beijing2022" variable to the three variables that are examined in Model 1 (Model 2).
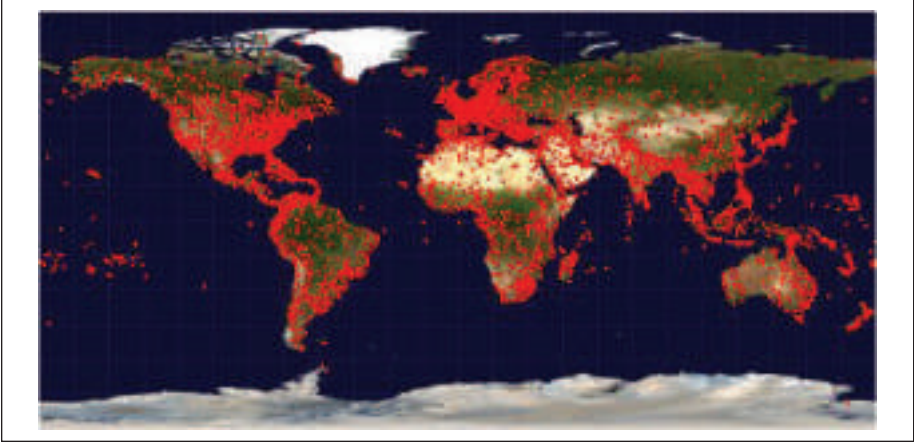
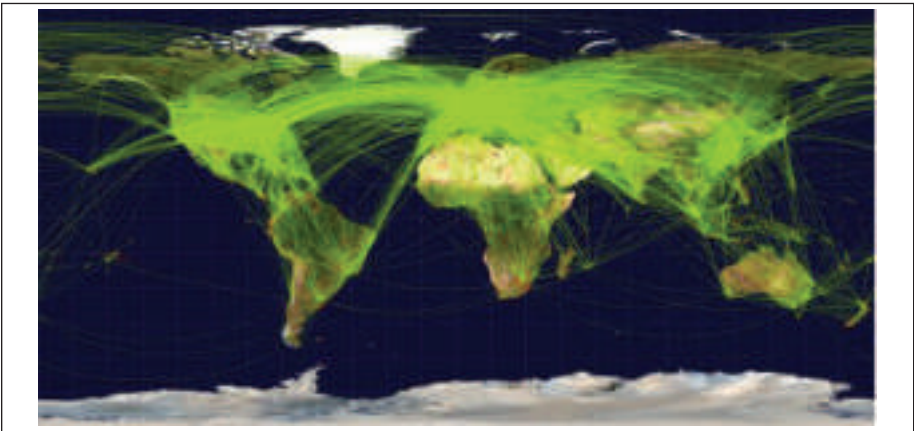**Figure 1.** The 5,497 airports that are available through the OpenFlights database.

Figure 2. Route Mapper: based on the OpenFlights database.

Results

Table 1 reports the *B* values, their standard errors, and the odds ratios (ORs) for Models 1 and 2. In Model 2, significant influences are found for distance (RQ1), language similarity (RQ2), number of flights (RQ3), and follows @Beijing2022 (RQ4). The OR indicates how the likelihood of the existence of a dyadic Twitter tie between people residing in different countries changes if the independent variable increases by one unit. Hence, the value of –0.99 for distance means that, with every additional 1 km of distance (between the ego and the alter), the likelihood of an international dyadic tie
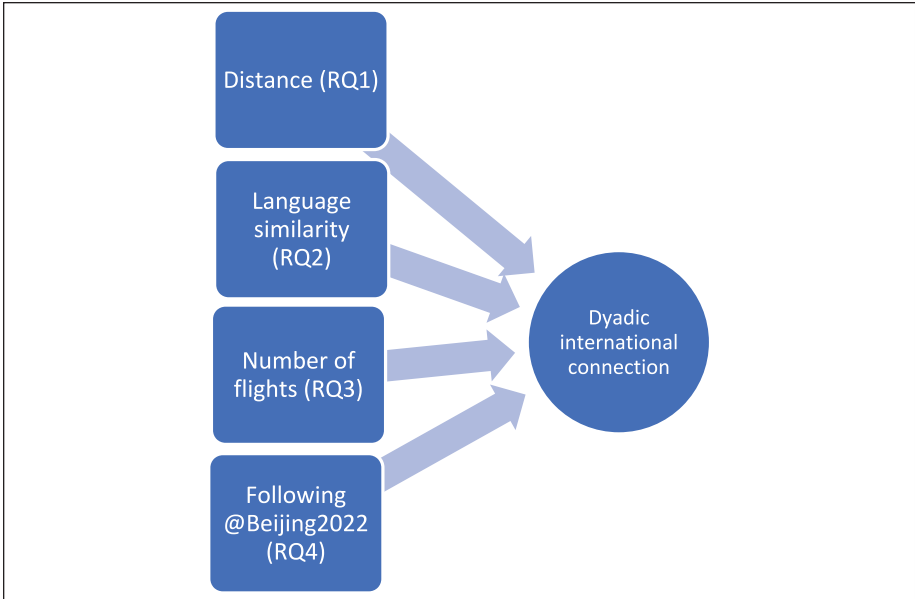
Figure 3. Analytical model for predicting the existence of a dyadic international Twitter connection.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Analysis of Dyadic International Ties (With Regard to @ AJArabic Followers).

	Hypothesized Model 0 effect	Model 1		Model 2	
		B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR
Constant		5.16 (1.07)	—	2.79 (1.19)	—
Distance (in km)	−	−0.19 (0.084)	−0.99***	−0.18 (0.091)	−0.98***
Number of flights	+	0.28 (0.05)	1.332***	0.19 (0.065)	1.21***
Language (Y)	+	0.22 (0.05)	1.257***	0.20 (0.051)	1.19***
Follow @ Beijing2022 (Y)	+			0.21 (0.10)	1.08***
Nagelkerke's R^2	0.10	0.27		0.32	
Correct classification	57.2	74.5		78.7	

Note. Significance level of OR ***$p < .001$.
OR = odds ratio; SE = standard error.

decreases by 1%. The value of 1.257 for language, means that, in cases where the ego and alter use the same language settings, the likelihood of an international dyadic tie increases by 25.7% (as compared to instances where the ego and alter do not have the same language settings). The value of 1.332 for the number of flights means that with every additional flight (between the country in which the ego lives and the country in which the alter lives), the likelihood of an international dyadic tie increases by 33.2%. Lastly, in cases where the ego follows @Beijing2022, the likelihood of an international dyadic tie increases by 8% (as compared to when the ego does not follow @Beijing2022).

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper makes a unique contribution to sports and politics studies, specifically, by providing a unique SNA of the extent to which a mega sports event enhances the links between fans from two different countries.

Indeed, as Gao (2021) reminds us, cultural identity has become an important strategic resource through which to improve international relations. Before communication, science, and technology became so prevalent in contemporary, modern life, it was people moving among countries (early missionaries, businessmen, armies and, later, the general public) who were the main carriers of trans-cultural sports communication. Various modern elements are also embedded in sports, strengthening the development and communication of modern sports, while promoting sport as a culture carrier. Over time, trans-cultural sports communication, through the constant flow of people, has gradually promoted the development of a substantial communication sphere. In the 21st century, online social networks are also at work, with significant effect.

Accordingly, the current analysis highlights that the likelihood that there is a connection between them increases by 8%, as compared with people who do not follow this account, while controlling for other relevant variables. Specifically, the study highlights that the increase took place among the citizens of countries that resisted the boycott of the games by diplomats from the United States, Australia, Britain, and Canada. Taken together, this analysis is the first to indicate that, during the games, there was a form of bond between the citizens of the two countries protesting against the Western countries' boycott threat (one of which was hosting the games).

Sino-Russian relations are now at their highest point since the mid-1950s, when Moscow and Beijing were communist allies. The Russia–China entente is likely to become even stronger in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Facing an intensifying hostility from Washington, Beijing will need Russia—its only major-power friend—even more. Meanwhile, Moscow looks to China, and its continuing demand for Russian energy and commodities, as Russia's best chance for economic recovery after the pandemic (Gabuev 2020; Lukin, 2021).

Hence, the current study is the first to demonstrate, on a large scale, an examination of the links among 50,000 of the Twitter followers of the Games' hashtag (versus 50,000 Twitter members who were not following the Games' hashtag), the impact of a mega sports event on fans' relations among those from different countries, specifically, Russia and China, two countries with a unique bond that was

formed during the Games. The advantage of the SNA method also comes with a "con," as the analysis is not able to distinguish the extent to which the motivation, and the trigger, for the increased links between Chinese and Russian Twitter members, is the result of a political bond which has been formed in the light of the boycott of the Games by Western diplomats, leading governments to form a united front against these actions, versus the impact of the Games on the formation of the bond. In line with our findings, future studies that follow up on our study should take a closer look, via qualitative methods, such as interviews, or quantitative methods such as surveys, to better understand the trends that have been revealed in this study.

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Note

1.   https://openflights.org/data.html#route

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