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The Role of Media Watermarks in Shaping Credibility Judgments: A Qualitative Study of Premier League Transfer Rumors among Chinese Gen Z Football Fans

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Abstract: In today's increasingly visual social media environment, users make rapid judgments about information credibility based on visual cues. Among Chinese Gen Z football fans, Premier League transfer rumors frequently circulate on platforms such as Weibo, Rednote, and WeChat, blending verified and unverified information. This study investigates how digital media watermarks influence the credibility judgments of Chinese Gen Z fans (born 1995–2010) when encountering transfer rumors online. Using qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with 20 frequent users of football-related content, the study analyzes how watermark characteristics (e.g., visibility, origin, platform context) affect trust and skepticism. The findings reveal that while some users still associate watermarks with copyright or authenticity, many no longer see them as reliable credibility signals due to widespread watermark manipulation and platform-specific misunderstandings. Notably, trust increasingly shifts toward first-hand foreign platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram), while Chinese platforms face greater skepticism. This research contributes to the understanding of digital visual literacy, challenges conventional assumptions about watermark credibility, and offers insights into sports media consumption and misinformation in cross-cultural online environments.

Keywords: media watermarks, credibility judgment, Gen Z, Premier League rumors, social media platforms.

1. Introduction

In today's visually saturated, platform-dominated media environment, the credibility of online content is no longer primarily judged through in-depth content analysis, but rather through the rapid impressions shaped by visual cues [1]. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the social media sphere, such as the rapid spread and widespread consumption of Premier League transfer rumors among football fans, especially among China's Generation Z demographic [2]. These fans interact with content daily on platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Rednote, where posts often blur the lines between official news, user speculation, and commercial content. In such an environment, digital source indicators, especially watermarks, play a central role in shaping users' trust or suspicion.

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They serve as immediate visual references, implying the legitimacy of content, the identity of the author, and institutional authority.

Understanding how digital audiences assess credibility through these symbols is crucial. In the broader field of digital semiotics and information authentication, watermarks have been extensively studied as tools for verifying author identity, tracing dissemination paths, and identifying ownership. For example, some scholars explored watermark-based authentication techniques in multimedia security applications, demonstrating how watermark formats (ranging from visible logos to invisible metadata) influence perceptions of legitimacy based on the audience's ability to identify the source [3]. These insights have influenced discussions in computer science, copyright law, and digital image forensics.

However, especially in sports-related rumors, its interpretive role in user-generated or hybrid news settings remains very under-explored despite the great use and research of watermarking technology in digital media environments [4]. This research gap should not be misunderstood as a lack of relevance. Rather, it highlights the urgency of conducting targeted research. Sports content (Premier League), especially Premier League transfer rumors, has significant cultural and emotional significance for fans, often shaping community identity, online discussions, and fan engagement [4]. However, in China's fragmented media environment, such rumors are often spread through unofficial and decentralized platforms, requiring users to navigate a flood of ambiguous information without traditional editorial gatekeeping [5]. Therefore, credibility assessment is often based on quick visual intuition rather than verifiable sources, making visual cues such as watermarks particularly influential [6]. In this context, the role of watermarks has shifted from a simple technical authentication mechanism to a socially embedded credibility signal, influencing how users distinguish between credible news and false content. Studying how sports fans interpret visual markers such as watermarks is crucial to understanding credibility judgment mechanisms in platform-driven media environments. Through interviews, this study can identify specific visual cues associated with trust or suspicion and reveal how fan identity, platform usage habits, and media literacy shape these judgments. The findings will provide valuable insights for improving media literacy and designing more effective visual verification strategies.

Additionally, Chinese Gen Z soccer fans provide a unique and important sample group for this study. As digital natives and proficient users of these platforms, they are constantly exposed to and deeply engaged with visually presented sports content. Their interpretation practices not only reflect platform characteristics but also reveal broader shifts in media literacy, fan culture, and trust in digital communication.

Given the growing prevalence of visual misinformation, the lack of empirical research on how ordinary users interpret watermarks and other digital source indicators in the context of sports transfer rumors represents both a research gap and an opportunity. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Chinese Gen Z football fans interpret and evaluate watermarks and other source cues, focusing on their form, origin, and position in Premier League transfer rumors [7].

This study adopts a qualitative research method and uses semi-structured interviews to explore how Chinese Gen Z football fans interpret and evaluate digital source indicators (particularly watermarks) in Premier League transfer rumors on social media platforms. This method helps to gain a deeper understanding of participants' cognition, experiences, and interpretation practices in their natural media consumption environment. Based on the interpretivist paradigm, this study aims to reveal the meaning-making process through participants' own narratives. Interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to flexibly capture participants' conscious reflections and implicit interpretations of visual credibility cues. The research subjects were 20

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Chinese Gen Z football fans (born between 1995 and 2010) who frequently interact with Premier League-related content on platforms such as WeChat and TikTok. Recruitment will be conducted through football fan WeChat groups to ensure that interviewees have direct exposure to the rumors covered in the study. Purposive sampling will consider diversity in gender, club loyalty, and media literacy levels to ensure the diversity of perspectives.

2. Literature review

The perception of credibility in digital environments is shaped by the combination of textual and visual elements. Among these elements, visual source indicators, such as watermarks, logos, and platform verification badges, play an increasingly important role in users' evaluation of online content, especially in visually information-rich scenarios, such as social media sports reporting [8]. These visual elements serve as heuristic cues that often guide credibility judgments when content spreads rapidly and originates from a mix of official and user-generated sources.

A foundational contribution to understanding media credibility comes from Gaziano and McGrath, who proposed a credibility measurement model based on perceived fairness, bias, accuracy, and trust [9]. Their research emphasizes that media consumers evaluate not only the content itself but also who is saying it and how it is presented. Although this framework was initially proposed in the context of traditional journalism, it remains highly applicable in today's digital media ecosystem, especially in scenarios where users need to navigate fragmented, rapidly changing information environments, such as the public discourse surrounding Premier League transfer rumors.

As a complement to the theoretical framework, some scholars studied the application of watermarking technology in content authentication from a multimedia security perspective [3]. They define watermarks as digital signals embedded in content to verify its source, author, or integrity. This technical research was subsequently expanded to a comparative study of different watermark types, distinguishing between visible and invisible formats, source types (e.g. official vs. third-party), and placement locations. Many studies employ experimental or quantitative methods to determine which watermark type most effectively enhances perceived credibility or mitigates abuse.

However, this study adopts a different methodological perspective. Unlike quantitative research that seeks to identify which watermark type has the greatest quantifiable impact on credibility, this study focuses on understanding how specific audiences interpret and emotionally respond to these visual cues. In this study, the target audience is Chinese Gen Z football fans, a group that is digitally native, socially active, and visually literate, and frequently consumes football-related content, including rumors, on platforms such as Weibo, Tiktok, and Rednote. This shift in approach is deliberate and necessary. While experiments can isolate variables and test effects, they often fail to capture the subjective meaning that users assign to visual cues such as watermarks. Therefore, this study employs semi-structured interviews to reveal the mechanisms underlying credibility judgments in specific contexts, which are shaped not only by the presence or absence of watermarks but also by factors such as users' prior knowledge, emotional investment, platform norms, and personal media usage habits [10]. Based on the preceding discussion, this study focuses on examining how Chinese Gen Z football fans perceive and interpret media watermarks on social media platforms and explores how these interpretations shape their trust in Premier League transfer rumors.

This study does not aim to identify a universally “most credible” watermark, but rather to map the interpretive logic and subjective trust-building process that users bring to their interactions with digitally marked sports content. This research contributes to the fields of visual literacy, source

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identification, and misinformation studies, emphasizing that credibility is not merely passively accepted but actively constructed within platform-specific, emotionally charged online environments.

3. Types and functions of media watermarks

In the online dissemination of Premier League transfer rumors, media watermarks serve not only as visual markers but also fulfill multiple symbolic functions. Based on the interview data collected in this study, three primary functions can be identified, including authority endorsement, identity recognition, and temporal marking.

Firstly, authority endorsement of watermarks refers to the logos or visual symbols of well-known international sports media organizations such as BBC, Sky Sports, or ESPN. When these logos are embedded in images or videos related to transfer rumors, they are not merely decorative elements. Through in-depth interviews, it was found that many fans view them as symbols of institutional legitimacy and journalistic professionalism. Their presence aims to reduce the cognitive load required for information verification, providing users with an immediate guarantee of credibility. This aligns with the broader trend in digital media, where audiences increasingly rely on visual cues to replace manual source verification in fast-paced online environments.

Secondly, identity recognition watermarks are frequently used by individual content creators or self-media accounts, many of which focus on football news, rumors, and commentary. These personalized watermarks typically include names or brand slogans as a mechanism for digital self-branding. Interview participants indicated that such watermarks could establish trust among fans familiar with the creator. Their repeated appearance within a specific media ecosystem helps enhance content credibility, which does not stem from institutional authority but rather from the creator's consistent output and community recognition.

Thirdly, watermarks with timestamps serve as visual indicators of content freshness and timeliness. In the fast-paced environment of football transfer news, the timing of updates is critical. Timestamps help users judge the freshness of rumors and their consistency with verified information. This time function is particularly important in competitive fan communities, where being the first to obtain reliable transfer information has social value. However, it is important to note that these symbolic functions do not operate in the same way across all digital platforms or user groups. The interpretation of watermarks and their perceived authority is closely related to the audience's familiarity with the content source, the visual consistency of the watermark within its design context, and users' prior exposure to similar media content. Therefore, while watermarks may symbolize trust, identity, or timeliness in a semiotic sense, their specific meanings depend on individual and collective media literacy practices.

4. Cognitive characteristics of Gen Z football fans

Chinese Gen Z football fans' interpretation of watermarks reveals a layered and context-sensitive credibility assessment model. Unlike static or universally reliable cues, watermarks are viewed by this group as conditional visual references. Their credibility is influenced by the context in which they appear, including platform background, screenshot integrity, and user experience. A clear preference for foreign platforms is prevalent among participants. Respondents often stated that they trust watermark images from international platforms (such as Twitter or Instagram) more than those shared on domestic platforms (such as Weibo or Rednote). For example, interviewee Marco mentioned that screenshots featuring the Twitter interface and originating from well-known accounts

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(such as Fabrizio Romano), especially those with his signature phrase “Here we go,” were repeatedly cited as credible and authoritative evidence. These images were described by participants as “the Bible of retweets,” symbolizing their high symbolic value among fans. In contrast, the same images or information shared on domestic platforms without retaining the original interface or presented in a visually modified form often sparked suspicion or accusations of fabrication. This cognitive behavior reflects a broader hierarchy of visual credibility, where users tend to trust native platform screenshots with visible watermarks more than posts presented in a context-free or pure text format. Watermarks combined with familiar platform layouts are seen as more persuasive than pure text statements or edited images stripped of contextual clues. The integration of watermarks with platform interfaces is thus interpreted as a certification structure, a composite of visual and symbolic elements that underpins trust. However, this trust is increasingly constrained by growing skepticism. Many participants reported that they rarely notice watermarks when casually browsing, and when they do, they are cautious not to treat them as absolute evidence. Widely available applications and software enable easy editing, deletion, or forgery of watermarks, undermining the authority of these visual elements. As a result, users described relying more on alternative credibility indicators, such as account names, posting times, social interactions (e.g., comment sections), and platform interface elements. This shift marks a transition from reliance on single visual cues to more comprehensive credibility assessment strategies. In summary, the cognitive characteristics of Gen Z football fans are characterized by visual reflexivity and contextual discernment. Watermarks are not entirely dismissed, but their explanatory power is increasingly constrained by the digital environment and user maturity. These fans' multi-layered credibility assessments reflect both their familiarity with media aesthetics and their growing awareness of manipulation techniques within the digital ecosystem.

5. Mechanisms through which watermarks influence credibility judgments

This section explores how media watermarks influence Chinese Gen Z football fans' judgments of content credibility. Based on interview data, the study identifies four interrelated mechanisms, including visual anchoring effect, reinforcement of group consensus, susceptibility to forgery, and platform context dependency.

The most prominent mechanism is the visual anchoring effect. In the context of rapid information consumption, watermarks serve as immediate visual cues, enabling users to form judgments without the need for in-depth verification of content. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced when watermarks originate from widely recognized media institutions. Participants described how they would automatically assume the accuracy of transfer rumors upon seeing the logos of Sky Sports or the BBC, without further verification. Participant Di noted, “When I see the Sky Sports watermark, I believe it without needing to confirm.” This heuristic reliance on watermarks highlights their function as a low-cost trust mechanism, enabling users to efficiently process content in an information-overloaded media environment.

The second mechanism reinforces group consensus. Watermarks are not only interpreted by individuals but also embedded within the social dynamics of fan communities. In online football groups, particularly on platforms like WeChat or club-specific forums, the repeated sharing of the same watermark content fosters collective trust. For example, when posts containing Fabrizio Romano's watermark spread widely in Liverpool fan groups, their credibility is amplified through repeated dissemination. This social validation transforms watermarks into cultural symbols; they not only mark the authenticity of information but also symbolize group identity. Through this process,

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credibility becomes a socially constructed product, and watermarks serve as anchors that tightly bind a group's belief system.

However, this symbolic power also contains fragility. The third mechanism mentioned in this study, the “trust trap,” refers to the misuse of watermarks through visual forgery. Several interviewees shared experiences of being misled by forged watermarks, which imitated the visual designs of well-known media brands. In a typical case, many fans are often deceived by false information on domestic platforms such as HuPu, as these platforms frequently fabricate fake images in the style of The Athletic to mislead others. These examples demonstrate that while watermarks are generally trusted, they can be easily manipulated and weaponized within the digital rumor ecosystem. The rise of watermark editing tools means that watermarks, once markers of authenticity, can now serve as tools of deception, thereby complicating the landscape of trust.

The final mechanism is the platform-context dependency of watermark credibility. Watermarks are not universally trusted across all digital environments. Their explanatory value is closely tied to the platform they encounter. A BBC watermark embedded in a Twitter post is typically viewed as credible; however, the same watermark appearing on Rednote, detached from its original context and shared without authorization, often raises suspicion. This suggests that users assess credibility through a composite framework involving both the watermark and the platform. The effectiveness of a watermark depends on its overall consistency with the visual, cultural, and technical features of its original environment, that is, the watermark’s contextual integrity.

These four mechanisms collectively reveal the dual nature of media watermarks in the contemporary sports media environment. They serve both as tools for quickly assessing credibility and as potential vehicles for manipulation. Their explanatory power depends on social dynamics, technical possibilities, and the unique visual culture of each platform. Therefore, watermarks remain an important yet increasingly unstable component in the quest for truth in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study employs a qualitative research method, specifically semi-structured interviews, to analyze how Chinese Gen Z football fans interpret and respond to media watermarks in the context of Premier League transfer rumors. By examining the types of watermarks and their symbolic functions, this study concludes that watermarks serve not only as tools for copyright or brand identification but also as conditional credibility cues within the digital sports media ecosystem. The research further elucidates the cognitive characteristics of Gen Z users, revealing that watermarks are no longer perceived as inherently trustworthy signals but are interpreted in conjunction with platform context, user experience, and broader social media interaction patterns.

The findings are articulated across four dimensions. First, watermarks are often perceived as copyright markers rather than credibility indicators. Second, cross-platform dissemination frequently leads to misunderstandings or suspicions of fabrication. Third, users tend to trust original content from foreign platforms more. Fourth, the credibility of watermarks is increasingly undermined by technical manipulation. These aspects collectively indicate that watermarks have evolved from static markers of authenticity into dynamic, context-dependent reference points. Based on these insights, this paper recommends that future media literacy initiatives should emphasize critical engagement with visual cues such as watermarks. It also suggests that platforms develop more transparent metadata or verification tools to supplement visual trust signals. Looking ahead, ongoing research should explore the evolution of credibility judgment mechanisms across different demographic groups and media environments, particularly in the context of increasingly sophisticated and widespread visual manipulation tools.

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