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# An empirical study on the image construction of Chinese Women's football in the era of social media

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**Abstract.** After systematically reviewing the development of women's football from the late nineteenth century to the present, this study focuses on analyzing the socio-cultural obstacles and predicaments faced by women's football at different historical stages. It further investigates the transformation of public perceptions of women's football in the era of social media. Based on an empirical analysis of 108 valid questionnaires, the findings reveal that social media has played a positive role in enhancing the visibility of women's football, reshaping its competitive image, and expanding its communication effects. However, challenges remain, including content homogenization, the reproduction of gender bias, and insufficient conversion from "cognitive recognition" to "behavioral engagement." The study indicates that social media provides women's football and female athletes with a platform to break through the limitations of traditional media coverage, allowing for independent expression and self-promotion. Nevertheless, there remains considerable potential for social media to further expand its influence. Drawing on the historical review of women's football and an analysis of public attitudes, this study proposes specific suggestions for image construction and public influence in the social media era, including content development, international communication, and the integration of online and offline engagement strategies.

**Keywords:** women's football, social media, public influence

## 1. Introduction

The development of women's football has been shaped by women's persistent pursuit of gender equality, as well as by institutional constraints and the stereotypical or neglectful coverage of traditional media. From the establishment of the first women's football club in Britain in the late nineteenth century, to the temporary popularity and participation that women's football gained during World War I in Europe, and then to the subsequent decades-long bans imposed by many European football associations, the sport has undergone cycles of enlightenment, brief prosperity, restriction, and revival over more than a century. Even though the Chinese women's national team once achieved the glory of winning seven consecutive Asian championships, and despite entering the twenty-first century, women's football worldwide still faces multiple challenges, including insufficient media coverage, unequal resource allocation, and persistent public stereotypes.

Traditional media often ignore women's football matches or report them through a gender-biased lens, focusing more on athletes' femininity than on their athletic competence. As Weber and Carini's research [1] indicates, between 2000 and 2011, only 4.9% of the covers of Sports Illustrated featured female athletes, while coverage of women in collegiate sports was also markedly underrepresented in both space and imagery.

The rise of social media has brought new opportunities for the promotion of women's football. Social media platforms have become crucial channels through which female athletes can break through the monopoly and constraints of traditional media, enabling them to speak for themselves. Through photos, text posts, vlogs, and live-stream interactions, athletes can present not only their training routines but also aspects of their personal lives, thereby constructing more authentic and multidimensional public images. Such displays and exchanges can effectively challenge the stereotype that "women's sports lack intensity and excitement," while fostering direct interaction and emotional connection with audiences, enhancing cohesion and visibility. However, as social media amplifies voices, it also introduces new problems, such as content homogenization, algorithmic bias, and the difficulty of translating "online support" into tangible "offline engagement."

Against this backdrop, this study combines a review of relevant literature with empirical analysis based on 108 valid questionnaires to systematically examine how social media influences Chinese public perceptions and attitudes toward women's

football. The aim is to provide insights for improving the public opinion environment and developing effective public mobilization strategies for the sustainable future of women's football.

## 2. The history of women's football development

The development of modern women's football began later than that of men's football. As early as the 1880s, reports and records of modern women's football and women's football clubs appeared in Britain. In his 140-year historical review of women's football, Laverty [2] noted that the first women's football team was established in Britain in 1881. On March 23, 1885, a match held in Crouch End, north London, attracted about 10,000 spectators. During the same period, the average attendance for matches in the Football Association League was also around 10,000, while friendly matches between men's clubs drew less than one-third of that number [3, 4]. The first British women's football club—the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) [5]—was founded in 1895 by Nettie Honeyball. According to McGregor [4], the club's formation, which attracted 30 women to join, marked one of the earliest milestones in the history of women's football. These historical records demonstrate that from the 1880s to the early 1900s, women's football already held considerable public influence in major British cities.

During World War I, as large numbers of women entered the workforce and participated in public life, women's football also experienced rapid growth. Laverty [2] pointed out that by the early 1920s, there were more than 150 amateur women's football teams in Britain. However, a sudden historical reversal occurred in 1921, when the Football Association of England banned women from playing on its affiliated grounds, citing "the unsuitability of football for the female physique and its incompatibility with feminine ideals." This marked the beginning of a long period of decline for women's football [6].

At the same time, women's football in several European countries—including France, Germany, and Spain—underwent similar fluctuations. According to Laverty [2], many European countries imposed official or association-level restrictions on women's football. For instance, France established its own Women's Football Federation and a league in 1918, but issued a nationwide ban on women's football in 1932; Spain introduced a similar ban in 1930; in Germany, women's football began to develop after World War I but was formally prohibited in 1955 when the German Football Association refused to register female players.

Laverty [2] further noted that on the international level, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was founded in 1904, and the formation of the Women's Football Association (WFA) in Britain in 1969 directly led to the lifting of the FA's 50-year ban on women's football in 1971. That same year, FIFA officially recognized the legitimacy of women's football for the first time. Following Britain's lead, France (1975) and Germany (1970) soon lifted their bans, while Spain did not do so until 1975 and only established a national league in 1988. The English FA finally abolished its pseudo-scientific gender discrimination clauses in 1993.

Women's football also experienced a similarly turbulent trajectory in South America, where men's football has long been dominant. Elsey and Nade [7] observed that women's football in Mexico flourished during the 1960s, with the number of teams growing from 17 in 1969 to 28 in 1970, before rapidly declining due to multiple factors. According to FIFA's 2024 Annual Report [8], Brazil—a traditional powerhouse of South American football—will host the FIFA Women's World Cup for the first time in 2027, marking the first time the tournament will be held in South America. This signifies a long-awaited global rise and breakthrough for women's football.

While European women's football was struggling to thaw, Chinese women's football embarked on a distinctive developmental path. The Chinese national women's football team was officially established in 1983, and within just three years, the team captured its first Asian Cup title, initiating an unprecedented dynasty of seven consecutive Asian championships (1986–1999). A particularly significant milestone came in 1991, when the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup was successfully held in Guangzhou, China—only 20 years after FIFA's recognition of women's football and a mere eight years after the founding of the Chinese women's national team. Through their achievements, the Chinese women's team demonstrated that a late-starting nation could achieve rapid, leapfrog development given appropriate institutional support and cultural conditions.

## 3. Research and analysis of the causes behind the difficult development of women's football

The history of women's football is one marked by obstacles and perseverance. From its tentative beginnings in the late nineteenth century to the bans of the early twentieth century, and finally to its gradual resurgence in recent decades, the trajectory of women's football has never been smooth. This process not only embodies women's relentless struggle for equality in sports but also exposes the deep-seated social prejudices, gender discrimination, and lack of resources that have constrained its development.

At its inception, working-class women in the Victorian era saw football as a temporary escape from the factory floor and domestic confinement. The sport quickly gained momentum—attendance at certain women's matches rivaled that of men's games and spread widely across Britain. However, as Dunning [9] observed in his analysis of early twentieth-century sports, social norms at the time were still deeply influenced by traditional gender roles that confined women to the household.

Physically demanding sports such as football were considered a "male pursuit" and a "male-exclusive domain." The rise of women's football was therefore perceived as a challenge to the established gender order and a threat to male dominance and authority. By 1920, after World War I had ended, society sought to reestablish traditional gender divisions, urging women to return to domestic roles. Downes, Syson, and Hay [6] further explained that within this broader social context, medical discourse quickly aligned with patriarchal interests, leading the English Football Association to issue a ban on women's football under the pretext that the sport was "unsuitable for the female physique and incompatible with feminine ideals." Beneath the façade of "protection," the ban effectively stripped women of resources: stadiums, referees, and league systems vanished overnight, and women were pushed back toward "appropriate" activities such as dancing and tea parties.

As Dunning [9] further analyzed, technological innovation, wartime shifts in employment opportunities, and the emergence of modern nation-states all contributed to a gradual equalization of power between genders. In response, sports provided men with a space from which women could be excluded—an arena that publicly celebrated strength, aggression, and virility. In this sense, sport functioned as a social mechanism for constructing and reaffirming male dominance and authority, offering men a means to symbolize and sustain masculine power.

Media coverage and public opinion in the early twentieth century vividly reflected this male-dominated narrative. Väisänen [10], in her study of Swedish media representations of women's football, found that in the 1920s, the Swedish sports magazine Idrottsbladet reported on women's football with a degree of respect. Yet, following World War II, the same publication began to claim that football was "unsuitable for women," arguing that female bodies were too fragile to endure such a strenuous sport. In an era of limited media channels, such monolithic and stigmatizing portrayals profoundly shaped public perceptions, contributing to the "decades-long disappearance" of women's football in Sweden. A similar phenomenon occurred in Latin America. In 1970s Mexico, for example, the newspaper El Heraldo de México published an article about a Swedish female player signing a professional contract under the mocking headline: "She's going to be a mother… and they still want her to play football!"

Although women's football bans were gradually lifted in the 1970s and the first FIFA Women's World Cup was held in 1991, even in the twenty-first century, women's participation in sports continues to be stigmatized and linked to negative stereotypes suggesting that women are inherently less athletic than men. A 2019 report by the French Senate's Delegation on Women's Rights [11] noted that female footballers still frequently encounter sexist remarks such as "Go back to the kitchen" or "Women don't understand football." Similarly, Glazbrook, Webb, and McLinton [12] conducted a 2024 survey examining public attitudes toward Australia's women's football league. Among 171 valid responses, although only 30% of respondents were male, 42% of them agreed that "women's football lacks competitiveness and is not worth equal broadcast time." The study quantified "gender role beliefs" as the most significant predictive factor: the stronger one's adherence to traditional notions of "men as breadwinners, women as homemakers," the more likely one was to devalue women's football's commercial and cultural worth. Notably, this bias was not limited to men; some women also internalized gender stereotypes and disparaged female athletes, perpetuating a "self-fulfilling prophecy." When society collectively equates "intensity" and "competitiveness" with masculine traits, women's football is deprived of the power to redefine what constitutes "excitement," forced instead to endlessly answer the false question of "why it is not as good as men's football."

## 4. Analysis of the impact of social media

The marginalization of women's football in the media is reflected not only in its long-standing stereotypical portrayals but also in the sheer disparity in coverage and broadcasting time compared with men's football [12]. On one hand, women's football and female players receive significantly fewer opportunities to capture public attention than their male counterparts. For instance, the study by Sherwood, Lordanic, Bandaragoda, Sherry, and Alahakoon [13] found that coverage of the Australian women's football league in mainstream media was extremely scarce and difficult to access—a condition that has long persisted across the global sports industry. Around the world, women's sports continue to receive far less media exposure than men's sports, reflecting an ongoing imbalance of power in contemporary athletics. Male athletes are more likely to obtain essential resources and attention, while the limited visibility of women's football in mainstream outlets subtly communicates its perceived lack of importance.

This inequality is further substantiated by the report of the French Senate's Delegation on Women's Rights [11], which noted that although the share of women's football programming on French television sports broadcasts increased from 7% in 2012 to nearly 20% in 2016, the total broadcast time for women's matches was only 443 hours—compared to 4,173 hours for men's football, a ratio of roughly 1:9. The severe shortage of television exposure for women's football limits opportunities for public engagement and falls far short of reflecting women's actual participation rate in the sport or meeting audience demand.

Moreover, this disparity extends far beyond football. Weber and Carini [1], in their analysis of Sports Illustrated covers between 2000 and 2011, found that women appeared on only 4.9% of covers, and when they did, the depictions often objectified female athletes—emphasizing their femininity over their athletic competence, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes about "women" and "women's sports." Similarly, Pedersen [14], in a study of 602 collegiate sports articles across 43 newspapers listed in the National Newspaper Newswork Directory, found that coverage of female athletes was significantly lower than that of male

athletes. Male athletes not only occupied more prominent positions on the page but were also more frequently accompanied by photographs, further highlighting gender inequality in media representation.

However, the emergence of social media has significantly improved the visibility and influence of female athletes and women's football. Beyond traditional media, women's football players and clubs now possess autonomous platforms for self-representation. Social media enables them to bypass traditional media gatekeeping, mitigating the limitations of unequal reporting resources. At the same time, clubs and players can interact directly with fans, young audiences, and brands. Athletes can share training routines, behind-the-scenes moments, and personal stories, cultivating an authentic and relatable public image. Through short videos or live streams, they can also showcase technical skills and highlight thrilling match moments—effectively challenging the stereotype that "women's football is not exciting to watch."

According to FIFA's [15] research report on women's football, social media has become a new platform for the sport's promotion, enhancing its influence and public engagement. Among FIFA member associations surveyed, 72% broadcast women's football through at least one type of platform, 64% via free television, and 63% through social media. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) [16] similarly reported that global media coverage of women's sports rose from 4% in 2018 to 15% in 2024—growth largely driven by streaming and social media platforms. Yet, despite women comprising about 40% of all sports participants, the proportional gap in coverage remains significant.

Although international organizations such as FIFA and PwC have recognized the growing influence of social media on women's sports, relevant studies in China remain limited. PwC's [17] report on China's sports industry pointed out that diversifying content formats—such as through social media dissemination and post-broadcast translations—is the most effective way to attract more audiences to women's sports, but specific studies on women's football are lacking.

To address this gap, a survey was conducted to examine Chinese public perceptions of women's football and the role of social media in shaping them. A total of 108 valid responses were collected through online distribution. The sample was slightly female-dominated (58.33% female, 41.67% male), with respondents primarily aged 18–40 (81.5%), indicating a gender-skewed but youth-oriented structure. The questionnaire focused on how social media influences the public's perception of women's football.

Overall, social media exhibits a dual effect in reshaping public awareness: it significantly enhances the positive dissemination of women's football while also revealing persistent gender bias and uneven cognition in online discourse. On the positive side, social media serves as a crucial channel for image-building. 58.33% of respondents believed it positively shaped the competitive image of women's football, especially among the 18–40 age group. Lightweight content such as short videos, match highlights, and athlete updates effectively increased both communication efficiency and audience reach. Notably, social media has helped women's football "break the circle," drawing in previously non-sports audiences—particularly young women. Furthermore, 61.1% of respondents affirmed its role in promoting gender equality, confirming PwC's [17] observation that social media engagement significantly boosts interest in women's sports, as illustrated by the 4.68 billion reads and over 10 million interactions related to the 2024 China Open tennis event.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. While communication volume has increased, content remains highly homogeneous. Most users engage with match clips (68.52%) and news updates (69.44%), while exposure to athlete personalities, daily lives, or international women's football remains low (only 15.74%). Moreover, social media can reproduce and amplify offline gender biases. 52.78% of respondents reported encountering opinions such as "women's football is less exciting than men's," a narrative especially prevalent among younger users (54.55% in the 18–25 group). In comment sections, technical discussions (58.33%) and nationalist sentiments (54.63%) dominated, but 34.26% of participants observed gender-discriminatory remarks, with women being significantly more sensitive to and likely to report such content (41.27%) than men (24.44%).

A clear gap also exists between changes in perception and actual behavioral support. While 57.41% of respondents follow women's football players on social media and 39.81% have participated in online fan activities, only 24.07% have paid to attend matches in person. This suggests that current online engagement largely reflects low-involvement "shallow participation," lacking conversion into sustained offline support.

In conclusion, social media has played a pivotal role in reshaping public perceptions of women's football by enhancing its visibility, emotional resonance, and social recognition. Yet, the effects remain constrained by limited content depth, the reproduction of gender bias, and weak transformation from awareness to action. To further leverage social media's positive influence, efforts should focus on diversifying content, strengthening coverage of international events, fostering an inclusive online environment, and developing integrated online–offline engagement mechanisms that deepen public understanding and support for women's football.

## 5. Conclusion

Through an examination of the developmental trajectory of women's football and an empirical analysis based on 108 valid questionnaires, this study systematically reveals the characteristics of public perception and behavioral patterns toward women's football in the social media era. It also highlights the persistent structural challenges and discursive constraints that have shaped

the sport's development. Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, women's football has experienced an early phase of brief prosperity, followed by decades of suppression, and gradual revival since the 1970s. Its historical evolution reflects the complex interplay between gender ideologies and sports institutions. Although the Chinese women's national team once achieved remarkable success in Asia through institutional advantages, it continues—like its global counterparts—to face structural dilemmas such as unbalanced media coverage, insufficient resource investment, and entrenched public stereotypes.

As an emerging communication channel, social media demonstrates a dual effect in reshaping the communication ecology of women's football. On one hand, it has significantly enhanced public visibility, expanded audience groups through short videos and athletes' self-media platforms, and attracted increasing attention from younger and female audiences. More than half of the respondents acknowledged that social media plays a positive role in shaping the competitive image of women's football. On the other hand, dissemination on social platforms remains shallow, fragmented, and often reproduces bias. Content related to women's football largely centers on match highlights and short-term trending topics, with limited in-depth coverage of players' personal stories or international developments. Moreover, online engagement has not effectively translated into offline support—public participation is still dominated by low-cost, light-interaction behaviors such as "likes" and "shares," while actual match attendance and consumption remain limited.

The findings further indicate that public perceptions of women's football continue to be influenced by traditional gender norms. Stereotypes such as "women's football is less entertaining than men's" remain widely circulated, particularly among younger audiences. In addition, women's football in China continues to struggle with low levels of professionalization, underdeveloped youth training systems, and inadequate grassroots support—issues that cannot be fundamentally resolved through communication efforts alone.

It is therefore essential to construct an integrated path in which communication and institutional development reinforce each other. From the communication perspective, efforts should focus on diversifying content, humanizing narratives, and normalizing dissemination to build a sustainable mechanism linking media exposure with public engagement. Technological innovations can be leveraged to enhance presentation quality and establish emotional connections between players and audiences, reducing the reliance on short-term attention driven by major tournaments. Specifically, a multi-level and long-term communication matrix should be developed, using short video platforms and campus channels to continuously showcase league competitions, training routines, and the growth of young players—thus overcoming the "post-event decline" in media visibility. Simultaneously, cultivating individual player brands and crafting narrative-driven, charismatic public images can strengthen emotional bonds and increase social recognition.

At the institutional level, greater efforts are needed to improve youth training, refine league structures, and enhance grassroots facilities to ensure sustainable resource support. This includes promoting deeper integration between sports and education by establishing alliances of women's football schools in cities with strong football foundations, thereby creating a coherent pathway from basic education to professional training. Moreover, innovative broadcasting formats should be developed through cross-sector collaborations with e-sports or entertainment programs to enhance attractiveness. Building open data platforms for sports events would also enable content creators and media outlets to generate diverse secondary content, enriching the narrative ecology and expanding media reach. In parallel, a rational and inclusive public discourse environment should be cultivated to reduce gender antagonism and encourage the evaluation of women's football based on its athletic merit.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations due to the relatively small sample size and gender imbalance among respondents. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating comparative analyses across regions and generations—particularly focusing on Generation Z—and employ qualitative interviews to explore the emotional and cultural mechanisms shaping public attitudes. Such work would provide more operational insights for advancing women's football.

The genuine breakthrough in women's football will depend on the joint promotion of systematic policy support, sustainable media communication, and deep public participation. As a key enabling force, social media should focus on diversifying content, fostering gender awareness, and integrating online and offline engagement to truly unlock the athletic potential and social value of women's football. Future studies could further examine how digital transformation can more effectively enhance event dissemination and commercial development within the women's football ecosystem.

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