

The Media Image Construction of Chinese Female Athletes on the Weibo Platform from the Perspective of Self-shaping and Other-shaping

Mingjia Zhao^{1,a,*}

¹*The University of Hong Kong, The Faculty of Arts, Hong Kong, 999077, China
a. zhaomingjia1128@163.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The portrayal of public figures, especially female athletes, has undergone quite a bit of transformation due to social media and internet news platforms growing rapidly over the past years. This paper mainly analyzes the Weibo image construction of female Chinese athletes from the two perspectives: self-shaping and other-shaping. Three famous athletes are chosen for this study: Zhang Yufei, Wu Yanni, and Li Wenwen, who have each gained more than a million followers on Weibo. By doing text analysis and case studies, the focus here is placed on how athletes manage their public images and also how media and public reactions shape those images. The findings talk about the main reasons why self-shaping images and other-shaping images show differences, including things like cultural influence and gender roles, as well as the fewer female examples available in sports. This paper may offer some references for people who need to maintain their images in public.

Keywords: Media representation, self-shaping image, other-shaping image, Chinese female athletes, culture and gender.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, the rise of Internet-based news and social media has dramatically changed the field of representation, including an explosion in public voice and information sharing on social networking sites [1]. Female athletes are also becoming visible. Such as Zhang Yufei in swimming, Wu Yanni in track and field, and Li Wenwen in weightlifting, all of them have gathered more than a million followers on China's biggest social media platform (Weibo). These athletes' images on Weibo have caught much attention from others, and the self-shaping as well as other-shaping viewpoints play an important role in current sports communication, particularly as we see more global influence and social media usage. These two viewpoints shape the public image of athletes, increase sports culture influence, and improve how much the audience understands and engages in sports.

The central point of this paper mainly focuses on understanding how female athletes in China are constructing their image by themselves on the Weibo platform, while at the same time the external world shapes their image too by the social platform.

Regarding the research goals, by using text analysis and case studies, this paper looks into how both self-shaping and other-shaping combine and work together when female athletes in China form their public image.

2. The Media Image Construction of Chinese Female Athletes on Weibo

Over a long period, how the media constructs female athletes' images is mostly through mass media reports on events, that is, through how others shape their image. With social media gaining popularity, female athletes are now with more ways for them to express themselves. Athletes can express themselves through various media platforms to realize the self-construction of media image [2]. This chapter tries to examine the shaping of Chinese female athletes' Weibo image during the Paris Olympic Games, both through their own efforts and how others shape them.

2.1. The Expression Form of Self-shaping Image

2.1.1. Show a Diverse Personal Image

This section talks about three Chinese female athletes from different sports, namely, Wu Yanni who runs, Zhang Yufei who swims, and Li Wenwen who lifts weights. Two of them got medals in Paris, and Wu Yanni also made a record for China in the women's 100m hurdles at the Olympics.

They share pictures taken from their training times and many different aspects of their lives, showing lively moments and also some cute everyday things. Table 1 is the selection, and it has been chosen from three athletes from January 1st, 2024, to August 25th, 2024.

Table 1: The Weibo Content during the Preparation of Olympic Games.

	Outfits	Life	Accessories Sharing	Training	Advertisement	Public Activity	Letter of Thanks
Wu Yanni	1	9	0	8	4	3	6
Zhang Yufei	2	14	0	4	8	4	2
Li Wenwen	5	9	2	3	0	3	2

Social media has awakened sports fan culture and reshaped the relationship between athletes and the public [3]. As can be found from the table, most of the content posted by athletes is about daily life, breaking the serious stereotype of female athletes and reducing the distance from fans. In this way, the female athletes show an image of working hard and living a colorful life.

2.1.2. Symbol of Professionalism and Confidence

The Paris Olympics, held in the birthplace of feminism, saw an equal number of men and women competing for the first time. International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach called it "one of the most important moments for women in the history of the Olympic Games and indeed sport." [4] With a growing number of female athletes participating in various projects, female athletes post training-related and winning pictures, which can be interpreted as women's persevering efforts and self-breakthrough in the game.

Zhang Yufei actively shares her training details and speeches when she accepts awards on Weibo. This kind of content reinforces her role as a professional athlete, and people tend to think of her as "focused and confident".

At the same time, Wu Yanni shares her reflections when she faces failure or challenges besides her success in competitions. Such honest reflections make her image seem real and more believable by giving a sense of a girl always trying to push beyond herself. Wu Yanni also posts her running pictures, especially during training or competitions, where she shows her power and confidence.

Li Wenwen's competition results and training videos are often shared on her Weibo. She is shown as the top of her weight class, making clear her professional status as a weightlifter of world-class. With numerous achievements, she conveys a powerful and determined image of herself.

2.2. The Expression Form of Other-shaping

2.2.1. Visual Comparison: Female Athletes vs. Male Athletes

Mulvey argues that in a world arranged by gender inequality, women are subjected to the male gaze, constantly being seen and shown [5]. The male gaze is also visible in the coverage of female athletes by various media on Weibo.

As is known to all, visuals like competition scenes and training pictures are quite common for displaying athletes' images, but there is a subtle difference in how the focus on visuals is shown between males and females.

The competition scenes of female athletes Zhang Yufei entering the water, Wu Yanni sprinting, and Li Wenwen lifting weights are used a lot by media and fans as the main visual image. The photos show their professionalism and their concentration in their fields. Furthermore, the media tends to lead the audience to judge the photos of their lives outside of sports. For example, Zhang Yufei's traveling pictures, Wu Yanni's fashionable clothes photos, and Li Wenwen's fun selfies all receive comments about their appearance, figure and makeup.

Male athletes' pictures are often shown as the symbol of strength and toughness. For example, swimmer Sun Yang and track runner Su Bingtian are mostly seen in their best competition moments, roaring and their fists clenched. In daily life, softer aspects such as fashion and other visual details are rarely seen when male athletes are depicted.

2.2.2. Gendered Comparison: Female Athletes vs. Male Athletes

With gender shaping, some differences are noticeable between how male athletes and female athletes are constructed in terms of image. Results showed that female athletes are not only minimized by the media but that hegemonic masculinity is a culturally accepted and reinforced phenomenon by both male and female sport spectators [6]. The shaping process on Weibo brings out the femininity of female athletes, giving more focus on their tenderness and accessibility outside of competition. For male athletes, mostly their strength and heroic side are emphasized, rarely showing any traits connected to gender qualities.

The way female athletes are represented on Weibo tends to be more about how they look, their temperament, and the storylines built around their roles. For example, Zhang Yufei is often described as a poor girl who grew up without a father and suffered big sickness, arousing a lot of sympathy. For Wu Yanni, she got the so-called name "goddess of track and field" when she first appeared in front of the public. The Weibo users even found some video bloggers comparing her looks to other female athletes in track events, usually to entertain the male audience. Even though Li Wenwen shows absolute dominance in her field, what's often depicted by the media is how cute or easygoing she seems, making her power feel less emphasized.

However, this kind of gendered talk is seldom associated with male athletes on Weibo. For instance, Sun Yang's image is built around being a hero and his achievements for Chinese swimming in international contests. The focus on his appearance or daily life is much less compared to his glorious competing moments. Similarly, Su Bingtian's track achievements are more about symbolizing Chinese speed and his dedication, and there's less mention of how he looks or his personality.

The media's description of male athletes' off-field lives is often in a stable and tough manner, and seldom involves the judgment of their appearance. The media image of them mainly represents power and success. However, female athletes are often portrayed as "feminine", gentle, or in some way

belittled as inferior to male athletes. Bruce believes that this stereotype reinforces the dominance of men in sports [7].

3. The Analysis of the Deviation between Chinese Female Athletes' Self-shaping Image and Other-shaping Image

3.1. The Influence of Culture and Gender

Chinese female athletes are more often expected to be soft and graceful in the competition because the public is educated with patriarchal ideas, which promote that females should meet gender expectations. Therefore, media that covers sports often reinforces these same ideas, encouraging stereotypes about female athletes. In the field of sports information conveyed by the media, the media carries on the “stereotype” construction of female images, including female athletes, through orientation, and encourages women to default to their subordinate position in the patriarchal social structure [8].

Female athletes' self-shaping image has been influenced by gender expectations. To show their strength while maintaining the traditional female characteristics, they may suffer great mental stress, which can impact their career choices and self-cognition. Female athletes treat these gender expectations in different ways when they shape their media image. Some athletes might want to enhance their feminine characteristics to meet those expectations, while others might decide to challenge stereotypes by shaping images that contrast with the usual ideas of femininity.

In addition to this, the other-shaping image of Chinese female athletes differs in different sports. For instance, gymnastics and figure skating tend to be more “feminine” and are often linked to grace and beauty in performance, but in more strength-based sports such as weightlifting or boxing, there might be more questions or challenges for female athletes. The study found that sports considered “feminine” or more socially acceptable for women (like gymnastics or figure skating) received more media attention than sports deemed “masculine” (like weightlifting or wrestling). This reinforced stereotypes about what sports are “appropriate” for women to participate in [9].

3.2. The Lack of Appropriate Female Role Models in Sports

Although some world-class Chinese female athletes have emerged in some sports, such as table tennis, diving, badminton, women remain relatively marginalized in many areas of sports. Especially in traditionally male-dominated sports (soccer, basketball, track and field, etc.), female athletes are far less well-known than their male counterparts. Female athletes lack adequate long-term attention and resource support compared to male athletes, which leads to a relative scarcity of female role models. Due to the lack of these role models, the younger generation of female athletes lacks successful cases to imitate when developing their self-shaping image, which makes their self-identity inferior to men.

With the development of globalization, more and more female athletes are beginning to be influenced by international sports icons, such as some female sports stars in western countries. These women have not only made great achievements in sports, but also raised their voices in areas such as gender equality and social justice, setting new role models for women around the world. However, the western sports culture and female image are still in conflict with the traditional Chinese gender culture. Chinese female athletes may be influenced by these international idols and try to build an independent and autonomous professional image, but this image is opposed to the expectations of Chinese society for women (such as family responsibilities, gentleness, etc.), thus exacerbating the deviation between self-shaping and other-shaping images.

Last but not least, the limited visibility of female sports icons in leadership roles or as sports stars in the media leads to an unsatisfactory other-shaping image. With few diverse role models to help perceive female athletes appropriately, the public may stick to traditional or superficial interpretations

of femininity, fossilizing the way to interpret the complexity of female athletes. Future female athlete reports need to create more healthy, independent, professional and meaningful female images in the new era to eliminate prejudice and discrimination against female images [10].

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the Chinese female athletes' media image under the perspective of self-shaping and other-shaping in the context of Weibo. The results show that there is a conspicuous difference between how the media portrays them with these female athletes' self-shaping image. The media's report often follows a gendered and double standard, paying more attention to their appearance and femininity instead of their athletic skills and personal achievements.

The study offers a case study to support the theoretic concepts. It also inspires female athletes on how to better manage their media image, as well as advice for the media on how to report female athletes more equitably. By demonstrating the reasons that cause the deviance between the self-shaping image and other-shaping image, this research opens up new discussions on media representation of female athletes in sports.

However, this study has limitations. The most obvious one is that it only selects three Chinese female athletes, which leads to the fact that the findings cannot be used to cover all the Chinese female athletes' portrayal of media image. Future research should expand the sample range to include a wide range of athletes of different sports and performances.

Besides, as this study is qualitative, there is not enough quantitative data included that could give a more objective view of what was observed. Combining qualitative research with quantitative ways like using sentiment analysis or large-scale content analysis would give more robust results. Such methods could allow a better data-driven approach to study the self-shaping and other-shaping patterns more deeply. This would help make the understanding clearer for how female athletes handle their images in the media space.

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