

Image Construction of Generation Z Chinese Female Athletes from the Perspectives of Self-shaping and Other Shaping

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Abstract: *The construction of female athletes' media images reflects the changes in feminist concepts in society and is related to the development of women's sports. This article selects four Generation Z Chinese female athletes—Zheng Qinwen, Han Xu, Zhang Yufei, and Wu Yanni—as research subjects, using text analysis and comparative analysis methods to analyze 234 Weibo posts and 200 news reports. From the perspectives of self-shaping and other shaping, the characteristics of their media image construction are interpreted to provide strategic references for constructing media images of female athletes in China in the new era. The study finds that the four female athletes showcase the beauty of female strength in a multidimensional way based on their characteristics in self-shaping, highlighting individuality. In other shaping, the media constructs a heroic image, emphasizing the power of role models. Under the influence of commercialization, athletes engage in commercial activities for profit beyond charity work, but the objectification of female athletes still exists.*

Keywords: *Female Athletes, Media Images, Generation Z, Self Shaping, Other Shaping*

1. Introduction

To some extent, “the movement is one of the forms of male cultural self-realization. As a closed system, it binds men together and, at the same time, excludes women.” [1] From the Ancient Greek Olympics to the first modern Olympics, the athletes competing were all men, which was clearly unfair to women, and thus, women began to fight for their sporting rights, with female athletes having the same number of places as male athletes at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Women have played a more important role in the history of China's Olympic participation. As of the Tokyo Olympics, women account for over 64% of the 284 Olympic champions from China. However, in a highly mediatized society, issues such as the objectification and scrutiny of female images persist. Ruth Mateos de Cabo and Ricardo Gimeno analyze the portrayal of women in online Spanish newspapers to explore the possibility of gender bias in online news. [2] The media portrayal of female athletes has always been an important research topic. Reval, using Foucault's discourse analysis theory, analyzed French football websites and found that the athletic identity of female athletes is often downplayed. [3] Regarding Chinese female athletes, Liu Hong and others believe that compared to their achievements in sports, the media image of female athletes tends to emphasize beauty or fashion, leading to a phenomenon of deviation. [4] Shi Yanli and Xiong Huan's research on the history of China Sports Daily and Sports Weekly over the past thirty years reveals that since the 21st century, reports on female athletes have shown characteristics of overlapping athletic images and stereotypes, as well as diverse representations, which are related to the rise of nationalism and consumerism. [5] Overall, existing studies have mainly focused on the media's construction of female images, focusing on female athletes as a whole in a single major competition, lacking individual exploration of the new generation of female athletes. This article selects Weibo content from Generation Z Chinese female athletes—Wu Yanni, Zheng Qinwen, Zhang Yufei, and Han Xu—as representatives, and combines relevant media reports to explore the following questions: How do Generation Z Chinese female athletes express themselves? How does the media construct the images of these athletes? What are the similarities and differences between the two? What kind of relationship exists between them?

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

2.1. Theoretical perspective

Self-shaping and other shaping are classic paradigms for analyzing the construction of character images, referring to two perspectives of image construction: the subject's self-shaping of their own image and the object's cognitive imagination of the subject's image. [6] Scholars have already integrated these two perspectives to analyze the construction of images of athletes, celebrities, and nations. Therefore, based on the above theory, this article explores the Weibo posts of the four athletes from the perspective of self-shaping and, on the other hand, selects the standpoint of other shaping using news reports and comments related to the four athletes as textual materials to explore the presentation of female athletes' images.

2.2. Selection of samples

Sports performance, event popularity, commercial value, and athlete fan numbers influence media coverage. This article selects the sports of 100m hurdles, tennis, basketball, and swimming, which are all popular sports that Wu Yanni, Zheng Qinwen, Han Xu, and Zhang Yufei are engaged in. These four athletes rank at the top domestically in their respective sports. The brands they endorse reflect their commercial value (see Table 1), and their Weibo fan numbers (see Table 2) are all over a million, indicating that these four athletes are representative figures.

Table 1. Four athletes commercially endorse brands.

Public Service Promotion	Brands
Sport	Adidas, Nike
Beverage	Erie, Gatorade, Nongfu Spring, Chagee
Fashion/Luxury	Balenciaga, Galénic
Technology/Digital	Honor, Omega, Flyco, Volkswagen
Others	McDonald's, Alipay, Tmall, China Mobile, Pacific Insurance

Table 2. Sample Account Statistics.

Accounts	Number of Followers	Number of Posts	Number of reviews, likes and reposts
Wu Yanni Jennie	1.054 million	231	1.086 million
Zheng Qinwen Ana	1.523 million	162	0.634 million
O Zhang Yufei o	2.114 million	506	4.257 million
Han Xu u	1.165 million	453	2.381 million

Deadline for statistics until July 22, 2024

With its multi-centered network communication structure, viral spread model, and significant communication effects, Weibo reaches a large user base and has become a central social media platform in China. Therefore, Weibo serves as a research platform for self-shaping. In contrast, media coverage from People's Daily, CCTV, and the four major portal websites (Tencent, NetEase, Sohu, and Sina) serves as sources for other shaping. People's Daily is the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, reflecting the historical and cultural changes in Chinese society. [7] CCTV is the official news website of China Central Television, and the four major portal websites are the main channels for the public to access daily information. These three entities deeply influence the shaping of character images.

2.3. Research method

This article adopts discourse analysis to explore the content, emotional expression, and interaction with followers presented on Weibo, aiming to investigate the relationship between discourse power dynamics and the social context. Due to the privacy settings of Wu Yanni and Han Xu, their Weibo posts selected to cover 29 posts from February 14, 2024, to July 16, 2024, and 26 posts from January 22, 2024, to July 16, 2024, respectively. Zhang Yufei's posts cover 99 posts from May 6, 2023, to July 18, 2024, while Zheng Qinwen's posts cover 80 posts from January 4, 2023, to July 13, 2024. The 234 posts are categorized into competition training, daily life, commercial advertisements, and social welfare aspects, as shown in Table 3.

The keywords “Wu Yanni”, “Zhang Yufei”, “Han Xu”, and “Zheng Qinwen” are used as keywords in the media reports on People’s Daily client, CCTV.com, Baidu web page utilizing the descent collector to crawl news reports each 50, after the above 200 reports into the ROST Content Mining 6.0 processing, the use of “lexical” and “Chinese word frequency analysis” function to analyze the generation of high-frequency analysis. After that, the above 200 reports were imported into ROST Content Mining 6.0 for processing and analyzed by “word segmentation” and “Chinese word frequency analysis” to generate a list of high-frequency words, and then used the function of “social network and semantic network analysis” to obtain a semantic network diagram to understand the relationship between words, and finally “sentiment analysis” to understand the emotional tendency of the media reports, which can be analyzed in summary. Finally, the emotional tendency of media reports can be understood through “Sentiment Analysis,” and then the image of athletes in the media can be analyzed.

Table 3. Distribution of content topics of the four athletes’ Weibo accounts.

Accounts	Competition Training	Daily Life	Commercial Advertisement	Public Service Promotion	Total
Wu Yanni Jennie	10	9	4	6	29
Zheng Qinwen Ana	40	16	22	2	99
o Zhang Yufei o	27	46	19	7	80
Han Xu u	10	9	4	3	26

3. Data Results and Findings

3.1. Self-presentation on social platforms

3.1.1. Tradition to Modernity: A Multi-Dimensional Presentation of the Beauty of Women’s Power

Susan Bordo argues that muscles symbolize strength and masculinity, are a direct expression of masculinity, and are not usually considered a physical burden that women should bear, [8] whereas in the last decade or so, the growth of feminism, coupled with the rise of social media, has drastically altered the media landscape, with new forms of intersectional femininity- “both beautiful and powerful”-emerging. [9] In the 87 tweets of the four athletes, they can be more proactive and courageous in their body narratives and fight against traditional notions, and the styling and make-up displayed in 10 of her tweets have made her a hot topic of discussion off the field of play. Zheng Qinwen’s 99 tweets include 40 tweets about her training for matches. As a tennis player, her body and strength are generously displayed, reflecting her confidence and pride. This shows that Generation Z Chinese female athletes are not limited to traditional definitions and are brave enough to defy them, giving female athletes diversified and personalized expressions according to their own understanding.

3.1.2. Heroes to Civilians: Characters Disappear to Present Their True Selves

The “star” is a product of mass culture, and Fisk argues that stars are famous for their public performances on screen and in other media and are the embodiment of the ideals and values that the public derives from their fictionalized appearances and performances on and off the stage and screen. [10] In other words, while celebrities depend on the mass media and are distanced from the public by their idealized images, in the Internet age, celebrities have moved towards a dialogue with the public as equals.

This is reflected in the use of Weibo by Generation Z female athletes in China. Zhang Yufei has the highest percentage of Weibo in her daily life, where she uses emoticons to enrich her expression, commonly used Internet words such as *banana green* (anxiety), and jokes such as “I have a way to make everyone lose 2kg instantly”. As the champion of the Olympic Games, World Championships, Asian Games, and other events, these messages, to a certain extent, dissolve the character of the halo, the funny, cute side of the audience, in the emotional closer. In addition, the blogger and the followers will also form a kind of quasi-social interaction, this unilateral relationship allows followers to imagine the blogger as a close friend to communicate with, such as the followers of the sister of the geese of the sister of Ni. For example, the fan “Nie’s Yan’er” drew a portrait of Wu Yanni, which was affirmed by herself, and this kind of positive interaction undoubtedly satisfies the psychological needs of the followers.

3.1.3. Public Good to Business: Demonstrating Business Value Beyond the Field of Play

Athletes are the face of the nation. Secondly, they are the spokespersons of social icons. The performance and achievements of outstanding athletes in the year like to imitate the object of people, especially young people. [11] Therefore, athletes use daily speech and behavior to regulate, highlighting a sense of social responsibility. Among the 234 blog posts counted, 18 tweets are related to public welfare. On the one hand, they carry out public welfare publicity in the field of sports, such as Zhang Yufei's call for people to get moving on the Olympic Day; on the other hand, they also actively guide some social hot topics through their social influence, such as Wu Yanni's blog to cheer college entrance examination.

In addition, the commercial value of female athletes around their personal IP has been gradually explored, and the post-feminist discourse spawned by the neoliberal model has led to the formation of an "individualized entrepreneurial spirit" that portrays women as capable and entrepreneurial individuals and sees them as personal brands. [12] Among the Weibo samples counted, there were 49 pieces of commercial content, suggesting that the "she-economy" of China's Generation Z female athletes is also on the rise, and that athletes are not limited to sports, but rather to beverage, fashion, technology, and other types of large brands. According to Grant McCrackee's theory of meaning transfer, "celebrity image transfer" refers to how a celebrity's image affects consumers' internal psychological and external behavioral activities. [13] Therefore, it can be shown that the images of female athletes of Generation Z in this paper have a certain degree of fit with the brand and that these female athletes also represent the beauty and fashion of the present time.

3.2. Image Construction in Media Coverage

3.2.1. Based on the performance on the field of play, portraying national heroes

The high-frequency words in Table 4 focus on the description of sports events, which shows that media coverage still focuses on the sports field, and when further broken down, words such as "basketball", "butterfly", "athletics", etc. describe the sports that athletes participate in. Further breakdown, words such as "basketball", "butterfly" and "track and field" indicate the sports in which the athletes participate; "Olympic", "Asian," and "national" are meant to indicate the level of the event; "training" and "coach" indicate the factors that influence the game off the field, while words such as "champion", "won", and "score" indicate the level of the game. Words such as "champion", "won", and "results" describe the outcome of the competition, and overall media coverage emphasized the athletic identity of the four women.

Table 4. Distribution of content topics of the four athletes' Weibo accounts.

Number	Keywords	Frequency	Number	Keywords	Frequency
1	Han Xu	1494	16	Butterfly Stroke	303
2	Wu Yanni	1072	17	Race Course	302
3	Competition	1048	18	Coaches	290
4	Zhang Yufei	950	19	Players	282
5	China	941	20	Season	279
6	Achievements	713	21	Time	259
7	Zheng Qinwen	673	22	Program	247
8	Womens Basketball	655	23	Athletic	236
9	Champion	511	24	Acquired	236
10	Women's Basketball	506	25	Tennis	233
11	Athletes	457	26	Athletics	232
12	Final Match	439	27	Olympic	219
13	Training	399	28	National	208
14	Basketball	376	29	Swimming	206
15	Contestants	327	30	Asia	197

Throughout the web semantic map (Figure 1), the four female names are the central keywords, forming a complex multilateral relationship with other words. The secondary keywords around each name are almost related to the characteristics of sports programs and athletic achievements, and it is worth noting that the four names are commonly associated with "China" and "champion", which indicates that the four female athletes' brilliant achievements on the field of play have shaped a positive character image, and they are treated as national heroes by the media. This suggests that the four female athletes' brilliant achievements on the field of competition have created a positive image of

themselves as national heroes, and that the media has reinforced their national identity by giving them the meaning of national rise, national wealth and national pride. [14]

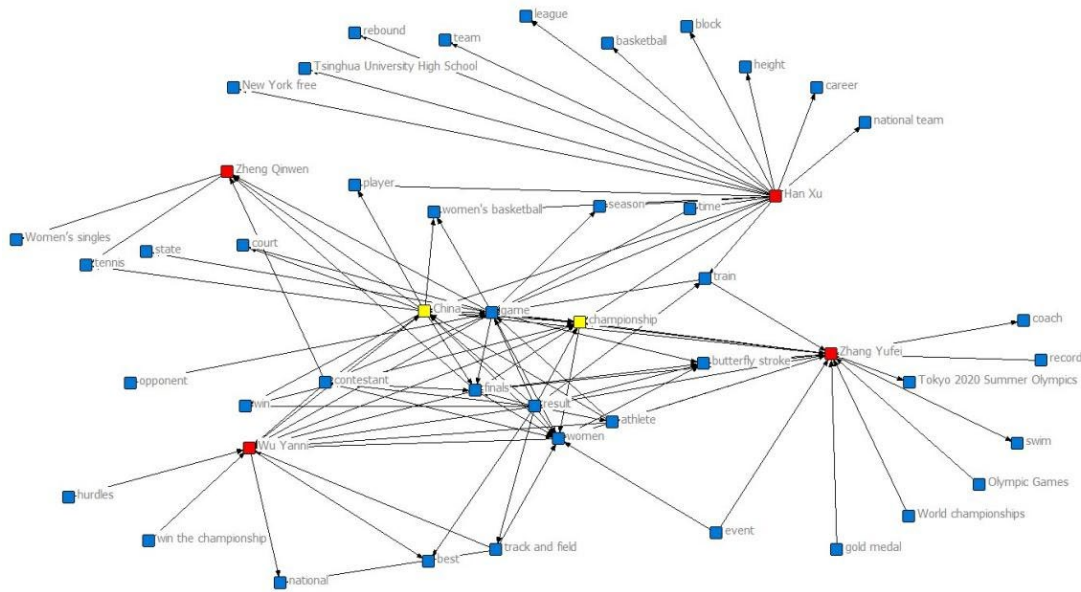


Figure 1. Semantic Web Diagram.

3.2.2. Downplaying Gold Medalism, Accepting Failed Heroes

Sentiment analysis can more intuitively reflect the basic attitude of media reports, so the author used the sentiment analysis function in ROST-CM to analyze the related media reports, and the results are shown in Table 5, in which the proportion of positive sentiment is the highest, 69.18%. It can be seen that the media reports on athletes basically have a positive attitude, and further analysis of the text of the positive sentiment, found that this positive on the one hand, from the athletes' excellent performance on the field, on the other hand, the concept of "only the gold medal theory" has gradually faded, the media more from the "humanistic" perspective to pay attention to athletes. On the other hand, the concept of "only gold medal" has gradually faded, and the media pays more attention to athletes from the perspective of "humanism", and the athletes selected in this article are not invincible, but their spirits and positive attitudes towards life are also recognized, and the media set up a role model for the society by presenting the diversified images of these female athletes.

Table 5. Sentiment analysis results.

Results	News Text	
	Number of Entries/Article	Percentage
Positive Sentiment	2357	69.18
Neutral Sentiment	575	16.88
Negative Sentiment	475	13.94

In addition to positive emotions, neutral emotions account for 16.88%, and negative emotions account for 13.94%. Upon further examination of the text, some of these emotions are descriptions of negative objective facts, such as failures, injuries, etc., while others are reports on topics related to the appearance, emotions, and family of female athletes, such as Wu Yanni participating in competitions while wearing makeup. These reports mainly originate from self-media on the four major portal websites. Although the perspectives of these reports have shifted from portraying perfect national heroes to portraying vivid individuals, the image of female athletes has become a form of social capital that can be consumed, thus becoming a cultural symbol of consumption, encoded, displayed, viewed, and scrutinized. [15]

4. Conclusions

This article analyzes the basic characteristics of media image construction from the perspectives of self-shaping and other shaping for four Generation Z female athletes. Regarding self-presentation on social platforms, they can showcase the muscles and strength expected of athletes in competitions, training, and daily life, while presenting a more diverse image that combines their unique

characteristics. They actively use social media to convey personalized information, enhancing the three-dimensionality and authenticity of their image, and engaging with followers. They also focus on building their public welfare image to expand their commercial value as athletes. In terms of media portrayal, the media generally portray athletes positively to serve as societal role models. However, some self-media reports still focus on issues related to the appearance and emotions of female athletes, presenting a tendency to commodify female athletes in media coverage.

Empowered by post-feminism and neoliberalism, Generation Z female athletes have gained agency in defining their image. They integrate strength, muscles, and the female body, showcasing the unique beauty of female athletes. Moreover, technological advancements have allowed athletes to change their self-image management strategies, aiming to interact more authentically with the public. In media portrayal through other shaping, although the emphasis on *the once-feverish obsession with the gold has gradually diminished*, and there is an increase in personalized reporting centered around athletes, outstanding athletic performance remains the central theme. The roles of national heroes and role models of the times still dominate, contrasting with the emphasis on individuality in the self-shaping perspective. The distinct narrative constructions of solid individuality and national heroism present complexities in shaping the image of female athletes. Additionally, since the commercialization of women's sports, commercial activities centered around female athletes have somewhat promoted the development of women's sports. However, under consumerism, there remains the possibility of female athletes being objectified in market operations. Therefore, further exploration is needed to ensure that the media image construction of female athletes can have a more positive societal impact.

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