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Behind the Portrait of Media: A Study into the Media Image of Chinese Female Athletes from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Theory

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Abstract: As a growing number of Chinese female athletes participating in international sports events, the media's report on the image of Chinese female athletes has attracted lots of attention. On the basis of the existing research, this paper discusses the current characteristic of female athletes' media image, the reality reason behind the presented characteristic and its possible effects, which will provide a fresh perspective for future research. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory, this paper makes an in-depth study into the case of Chinese Olympic Champion Yang Qian. The research shows that due to the changes in media communication, market environment and political atmosphere, the image shaping of Chinese female athletes presents the characteristics of diversification and individuation. The symbolic capital they possess not only brings them sufficient commercial value, but also offers them the opportunity to reshaped the public cognition, which helps broaden the public's understanding of the gender roles of athletes.

Keywords: Female athletes, Media, Social capital theory, Sports habitus

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of competitive sports and the general improvement of women's social status, female athletes have gradually earned their places in various competitive events. As the result, the images of many female athletes have become well-known through the spread of mass media.

Regarding the attitude of mass media towards women's participation in sports events, scholars from various countries and researching periods have already given different answers. Statistics from British media during London Olympic Games showed that there was a significant gender bias in the number of media reports on athletes [1]. While in northern Europe, media reports during the Sochi Winter Olympics did not show obvious gender bias, but paid more attention to the actual performance of athletes in competitions [2]. Similar research was also conducted in China. A statistical survey of reports from major media pointed out that in China, it is still common for female athletes to be put on the fringes of news coverage [3].

However, rather than general statistical trends, this article is more concerned in figuring out the way Chinese media uses to portray our female athletes, tracing the causes and try to find out its reality impact on the social group as "female athletes".

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By possessing various means of communication, media has the right to speak in all aspects of society. From the perspective of gender and social power structure, the right to speak is usually held in the hands of a small yet powerful group, that is, a male-centered group. Therefore, the process that media shapes the images of women are inevitably adjusted by patriarchal culture to meet the expectations of male-centered culture, which constitutes a hidden "symbolic violence" [4].

Past researches have already discussed the gender role expectation in different types of sports event. In confrontational and strength-based events, female athletes are facing with the dilemma that their muscular images do not match with the popular aesthetics of the public. For example, in bodybuilding, the strong physique and vigorous vitality presented by competitive bodybuilding conflicts with the femininity that society is accustomed to, which to a certain extent hinders the rational judgment on female bodybuilders [5]. On the other hand, in rhythmic gymnastics, figure skating as well as other non-confrontational and more "gentle" events, the public are intended to appreciate the body aesthetics of female athletes while ignoring the fact that they actually gained their shapes and skills at the cost of long-tern health. Female athletes from those events are also very likely to be bullied on the internet for their exposed costumes [5].

Although female athletes are constantly tortured by gender role expectations, a recent textual analysis of 220 reports from mainstream media shows that the media images of female athletes are gradually becoming less gender oriented. The attention on female athletes is more focused on their sports performance instead of their gender identity. At the same time, more and more female athletes become the “hero” in news narratives, which means that the gender stereotype has been improved to a certain extent [6].

In recent years, the rising power of social media has already reshaped the channels of information dissemination. By providing rich content of text, images and video materials, social media makes the image of athletes more multi-faceted. On the internet, a group of athletes with vivid personalities has gradually changed the stereotype that athletes are trained only to fight for their country, which enables media to produce a more diverse image of athletes [7].

To summarize past studies, there have been abundant research in the topic of female athletes and their media images. Researchers generally agree with the fact that gender role expectation constantly exists within the portraits of Chinese female athletes, while the question that how this issue have developed during the era of new media and remains comparatively less discussed. Therefore, by researching into the characteristic of social media and its influence to the preference of public attention, this study attempts to provide a new perspective on related area of research. The following writing will be divided into four parts: theoretical foundation, case study, discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The study is conducted on the basis of Social Practice Theory, which was originally proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his theory, Bourdieu introduced the notion of capital, field and habitus, and explained how social reality works in an integral system.

Bourdieu defined capital as particular assets in productive uses. In practice, it could take four principle forms: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. He perceives economic capital as purely material assets which can be directly transformed into money or institutionalized in the forms of property rights, while social capital is the sum of resources that accumulate to an individual or a group by possessing a durable relationship network built on mutual acquaintance and recognition. Cultural capital refers to assets such as competencies, skills, qualifications in certain field, which enable holders to promote their cultural authority [8]. Symbolic capital was put forward later, but also served as a crucial part in this social capital theory. Bourdieu described symbolic capital as the resources available to an individual on the basis of honor, prestige or recognition, the value that one holds within a culture [9].

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A field refers to a non-homogeneous social arena in which people strive and maneuver in order to gain desirable resources, or it could be defined as a setting in which human and their social positions are located, such as economy, politics, arts, sports, science or education. The position of each individual or group in the field is a result of interaction based on certain rules, capitals and habitus. According to Bourdieu, through engaging in certain field, individual will develop a certain disposition for social action. Those dispositions which individual develops through practice will eventually constitute a system of dispositions: habitus [10]. The habitus consists of two different parts: the tendency to hold and use one's body in a certain way, such as posture and accent, and more abstract mental habits, for example, our perception, thoughts and action [11].

As a typical physical activity of human beings, sports exists by different forms in different cultural and ethnic groups. With the evolution of history, sports as a part of social culture have also changed and expanded its realm. By reviewing the structure of Bourdieu's theory, this article provides an approach to better interpret the public issues in sports. In the context of sports, the athletes possess different forms of capital. Internal social capital includes their fame and prestige, life experience, professional skills and mental state, while the external social capital refers to the specific environment and social network that they live and work in. Economic capital for athletes usually generates through their business activities, such as advertisement or celebrity endorsements. Cultural capital mainly embodies in the books, images, sports equipment and other products related to the sports culture. Symbolic capital is the public recognition of their privilege and reputation, which is accumulated with the assistance of sports fans and mass media [12]. Though being defined separately, each form of capital can be transformed into one another through social practice. For example, in sports industry, through the investment of economic capital, that is, the production of sports commodities, the public recognition of the sports brand accumulated. Then, by continuing running the production line, the power of recognition would transformed into commercial benefits, which adds to the economic capital. That is the process of capital regeneration [13].

While being involved in sports-related practice, the subject of behavior should follow certain rules. Sports habitus is an invisible behavioral rule for those who are involved in sports, it determines how individuals treat the sports they participate in. Due to the influence of the social, economic and cultural aspects, sports habitus presents in different functional way. Therefore, to some extent, the changes in sports habitus can reflect the changes in the social structure. When the status of a specific sports activity is stabilized, the activity becomes the preference of a particular class, while people from other classes are not invited. In this way, sports habitus comes into a symbol of social power structure [14].

3. Case Study

3.1. Case Description

The object of this case study is a famous sports figure, Yang Qian. Yang is a Chinese sport shooter who represented China during the Summer Olympics Game in Tokyo, where she won two gold medals at the age of only 21.

On July 14, 2021, Yang was listed as a member of the official Chinese sport shooting delegation for Tokyo Olympic Games. On 24 July 2021, she won the gold medal in women's 10 meter air rifle, which is the first gold medal of this Olympiad. Three days later, she teamed with Yang Haoran to win the gold medal in mixed 10 meter air rifle team event, bringing another medal of honor to her homeland. Apart from being a female athlete, she is currently a third-year undergraduate studying economics and management at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and a favorite of commercial brand, which adds more complexity to her public image.

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In this case, both mainstream media and social media are taken into consideration in order to compare the differences between two sources of media in China. The study takes People's Daily as a representative of mainstream media, and Sina Weibo as a representative of social media. All materials come from the Internet.

As is shown in Figure 1, in the official website of People's Daily, 28 reports about Yang are found in total. Among those, 13 reports focus on her sport performance and moment of triumph during the Olympic Game, 4 reports focus on the honorary title she and her teammates received form the state, which means that over 60 percent of those reports set her identity as a professional and outstanding sportswoman who had brought great fortune to her country.

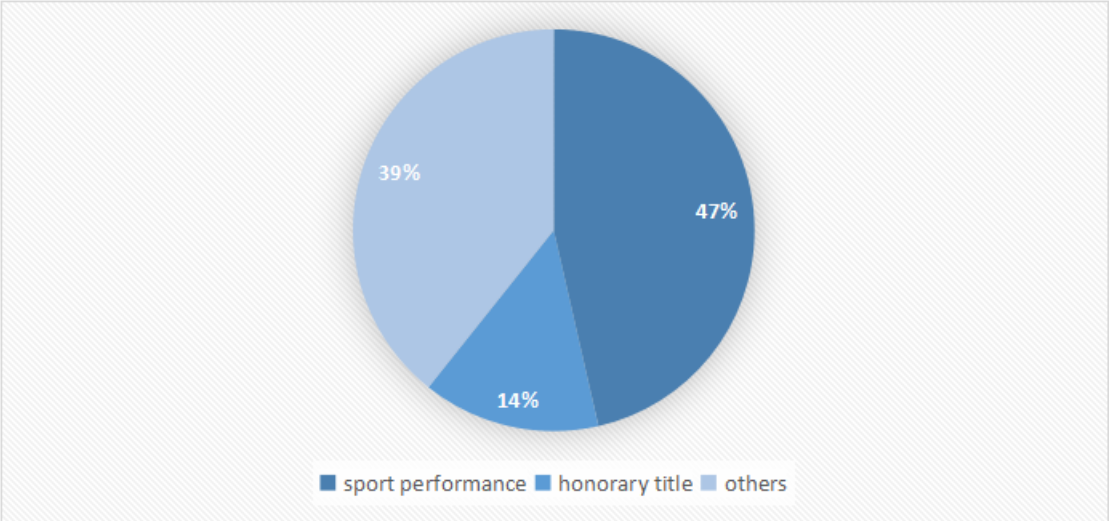


Figure 1: Composition of mainstream media coverage [15].

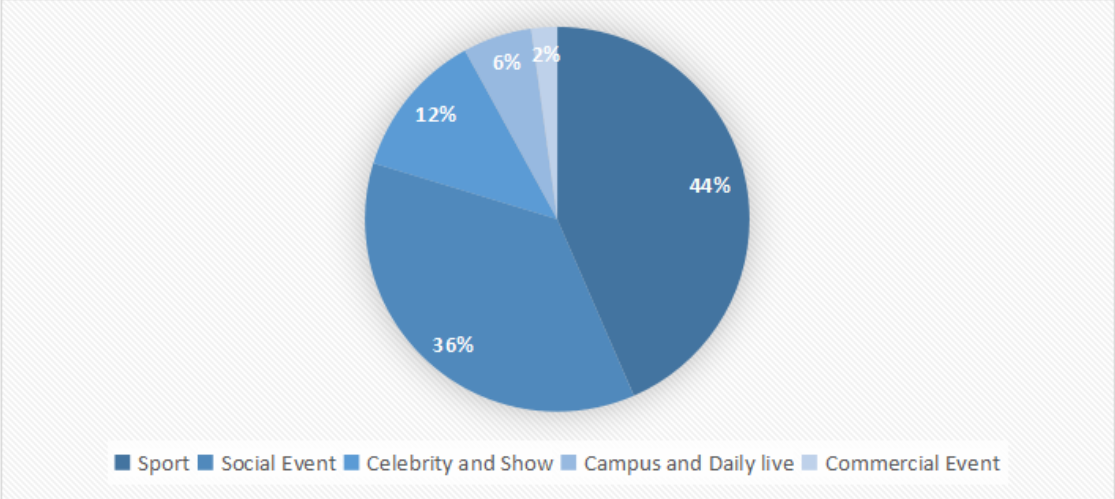


Figure 2: Composition of social media topic [16].

However, the data presented in Figure 2 of Sina Weibo shows a different trend. Until August 2022, the study has collected 138 hot-searched topic from the information stream of Weibo, and found that the genre of those topic are rather various. The topics categorized under the label of 'Sport' still take the largest proportion, but are no longer the dominate ones. Topics under the label of 'Social event' count for over 36%, followed by 'Celebrity and Show', 'Campus and daily life' and 'commercial event', which hardly appear in the report of People's Daily. The reader should notice that not all those

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categories are divided clearly. The facial expression and appearance of the athlete, as well as her scholarship from Tsinghua University are also classified as the category ‘sport’. From this perspective, outside the stadium, the attention of social media presents an extensive and diffused character.

3.2. Case Analysis

3.2.1. The Periodic Feature of Symbolic Capital: From Collective to Individualized

The image of "Yang Qian" was originally built in background of the Tokyo Olympics. As the first gold medalist of the country, her image carried a good omen, playing an important role both in sports and political field, and woke up the positive feeling of patriotism among the domestic public. The picture in which she made a gesture of a heart at the awards ceremony laid the initial foundation for her public image. On the official website of People's Daily, as it was mentioned in previous part, most of the reports about Yang were written to appreciate her sports achievement and the honor she brought to her homeland, while the social media were obviously more curious about her appearance, personality and personal life.

The similar trend also appeared few years ago in 2016, when the female swimmer Fu Yuanhui became a new champion in November. The "Fu Yuanhui fever" started with CCTV5 publishing a video of her post-match interview in Sina Weibo, which then reached 100 million views. After this video was published, the vivid shocking expressions of the athlete as well as her improvise speech spread widely across the internet [7].

The result of media attention is the reflection of public preference in a certain period of time. In another word, people nowadays are more interested in the personality and temperament of the athlete. Although sports achievement is still the most crucial factor at present, it is no longer the only factor that matters.

The phenomenon of Yang and Fu was probably related to the change of political function of sports in China. During the past decades, Chinese athletes have widely participated in international sports events and achieved considerable results. The traditional function of sports in China was to bear the political image of the country, while nowadays people share a more liberal aspect to sport events, that sports is a way to demonstrate the spirit of athletes, such as fair competition, hard work and self-perfection [17]. Therefore, the media image of female athletes also shows the individualized and diverse feature.

3.2.2. Symbolic Capital Fulfills its Value: Depending on the Changes of Sports Market and Increasing Consumption Capacity of Women

In current sports market, the way individual images are shaped plays an important role in the process of capital transforming.

The value of symbolic capital is mainly reflected in symbolic power and symbolic value. Symbolic power is the power to gain appreciation from society and use it to obtain other services, and symbolic value refers specifically to the wealth generated thereby [18]. As for sports celebrities, the value of symbolic capital mainly embodies in increased salary, commercial advertising, sponsorship and endorsement after they became famous.

In 2021, the General Administration of Sports of China issued the 14th Five-Year Plan for Sports Development, which put forward new requirements for the sports market and industry. Considering the development results of the sports industry, the document put forward the expectation that "the supply of products and services should meet the needs of personalized, differentiated and quality consumers, and basically form a development pattern of consumption-led, innovation-driven, active market players and better structure" [19]. The 2021 Mass Fitness Behavior and Consumption Research Report released in the same year mentioned that the sports consumption of women showed

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a significant growing trend, with the average total consumption of 6,362 yuan, a year-on-year increasing rate at about 50% [20].

Industrialization and marketization enables the vigorous development of sports market. During this process, sports celebrities play an indispensable role. In sports and entertainment industry, sports celebrities are not only the main labor resources, but also the main form of capital [12]. With the growing exposure of female sports stars and the increasing of female sports consumption, the sports market has gradually recognized the commercial potential of female athletes. For instance, only an hour after Yang Qian won the Olympic Games, the hairpin she wore in the ceremony was put on the store shelves. And according to the report of CCTV Finance, the sales volume of the hairpin has exceeded 10,000 within a day. In addition, two months after the Olympic Games, Yang became the spokesperson for three top brands, covering the market of automobiles, mobile phones and cosmetics.

3.2.3. The Cost of Symbolic Value: The Invaded Private Space

The media reports on female athletes have become the intangible asset of them, and their symbolic capital is also in constant dynamic changes, which would have an impact on their social capital. On the one hand, to meet with the demand of readers, images of female athletes in the media reports usually present a trend of entertaining. The public attentions on them are not usually satisfied with their identity as athletes, but extend further into their private space.

The more popular she became, the more attention that social media would pay to her. In that case, the boundary between public domain and private domain are gradually blurred. That might negatively impact the balance of the athlete's mental state, which is also a part of her internal social capital. It may finally result in her sports performance, That is, the foundation of her social recognition. During the National Games in 2021, Yang won the bronze medal. While being interviewed by media, she confessed that "I have received too much attention", but "will try to eliminate the influence from outside". Her coach told the media more directly that high expectations have brought additional psychological pressure to the athlete.

3.2.4. The Conflict within Symbolic Image and the Reconciliation: The Chosen Habitus

The identity of a female athlete consists of two main elements, "female" and "athlete", each carries different yet interrelated symbolic meanings. A word frequency analysis on media reports of female athletes found out that words such as "Golden Flower" and "Clanging Rose" are often used to praise women who have achieved excellent athletic performance [21]. And after analysing the relevant reports of Yang Qian, a certain pattern was also found. That is, the sentences describing the professional level of the athlete were often bound with those who appreciate her youth and cuteness. Those content were often connected by inflection words (e.g. but) to emphasize the sense of comparison. Such tendency may suggest that the social culture has different expectations for athletes and young women.

Sports habitus is the reflection of social structure, in the matter of gender, this influence takes its form as gender role expectation. However, individual choice also plays a role in the formation of sports habitus. Social culture develops in a dynamic process. When individual sports behaviour that are inconsistent with standardized habitus appear in a social group, then other members in the group adapt it for some reasons, the habitus that constructed during past history might be affected or even changed [22]. In front of the public, Yang does not turn away from the female traits that already exist as gender stereotypes, such as youth, cuteness and beauty. Instead, she integrates them with her extraordinary sports literacy, creating a self-consistent image of a female athlete. It remains unclear whether she intended to reveal those character traits or not, but the truth is that she has inspired the media to enrich their story about female athletes in a more persuasive way.

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4. Discussions

It should be noted that Yang's case can not represent the current situation of all female athletes. Her youth, sports achievement and level of education have made her a beloved one of social network, and also helped her to better adapt into such a role, while athletes from rural and less developed area of this country may not being able to handle it.

Yang also has different social identities. She is a female athlete, a young girl in representation of the millennial generation and a student who study at the highest institution in her country. When discussing why she has received such public attention, it could be hard to distinguish one reason from another. To explore further into the topic of female athletes and their public image, this study suggests that future researchers should pay more attention to the diversity of their social background.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to figure out how Chinese media portrays the images of female athletes in the era of new media, tracing the cause and find out how these images and opinions would impact the reality for female athletes as a special social group.

In Yang's case, the process of how female athletes' images develop and interact with social environment could be clearly observed. In general, the study has three key findings: (1) Images of female athletes shaped by domestic media present a trend of individualization and diversification, which reflect the changing of social aspects. (2) The symbolic capital of athletes creates considerable value at a cost of giving away their private space. (3) Female athletes are not only the object of public cognition, but also the guider to a certain extent, playing a positive role in shaping the image of the group which they belong to. Different from being reported by mainstream media, female athletes have more opportunities to actively shape their self-image on social networks. In this concern, their interaction with the public will be a meaningful topic for further research.

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