The Trends and Factors in the presentation of athletes' media images

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Abstract: With the media explosion of Ailing Gu and other athletes at the Beijing Winter Olympics, the topic of the media image of gold medal athletes had attracted much academic attention again. The current study reviewed the media image of gold medalists from two aspects, the developing trends and the factors including communication medium, subjects, and audience. The results showed that the media image of athletes showed a trend of diversified and commercialized content, which was closely related to the more diverse communication platforms, rich communication subjects, and wide audience in the new media era. Communicators' message filter, a strong sense of social responsibility for the athletes, and a better media literate of the audience were necessary to cope with the problems that appear during its development. These findings were critical for better understanding China's economic and social development and examining ideas and methods for improving public perception of sports culture.

Keywords: Athletes, media image, trend, factors.

1.   Introduction

In recent years, sports stars had been gaining much attention from the public. Especially during the Olympic games, gold medalists were often on the top of Weibo's hotlist and were widely sought after by the country's people. It was due to the rising in living standards and the importance of sport in people's minds, as well as the widespread dissemination of their images in the mass media. However, the public's perception of a gold medal athlete was replaced by a media image constructed by the media and whose influence was created through communication [1]. Athlete media image was a typical type of media image, meaning the image of an athlete that is shaped and communicated through the media [2]. Nowadays, as the 'super producer' of media topics, the media presentation of gold medal athletes had become an important part of people's social and spiritual culture. With widespread attention from the media and audiences, this particular media image of the

gold medalist had also attracted a great deal of academic attention. On the one hand, this particular media image could be seen as a mirror image of the times. Its shifts also reflect China's mass media changes and even the changes in China's economy, politics, and people's consciousness. In addition, with the rapid development of the media industry, the media image of gold medal athletes as an important communication medium also influences contemporary social identity, the public's sports culture perception, behavior, and even the image of the country. Therefore, this study summarized the the changing trends in the media image of gold medal athletes and the possible factors including communication medium and audience.

2. Trends

2.1. The Diversification of Athletes' Media Image

Most of the audience's understanding of professional athletes came from the media reports. The impression in the audience's consciousness was formed by the information spread by the media. It was believed that the media image of athletes now involves various dimensions, which was the embodiment of the mainstream values and aesthetic orientation of different eras [3]. With the development of the mass media and the sports market, the media image of professional athletes presents two significant changes diversification and commercialization.

In the past, the media attention on athletes was mainly focused on their accomplishments, such as revealing their rankings. Furthermore, male athletes tended to receive much more media attention compared with females. However, with the rise of social media and a national emphasis on humanism in recent years, media portrayals of athletes had been more focused on presenting the athletes' multi-layered character and attributes, which could be reflected by the changes in the media presentation of female athletes.

Firstly, there had been an increase in the frequency of female athlete media presentations. Female power had become mainstream. In Fu's study of the female athletes in 'people's public' from 2008 to 2015, the number of reports on the female athlete in the long-term was lower than the one of males. It showed that female athletes were marginalized in China's mass media, which makes the one-sided and single media content more prominent [4]. Due to the long-term "stereotype" of women in society and the deviation of some female athletes' self-positioning, the image of female athletes was solidified in the sports reports with female athletes as the leading role [5]. The image of the female athlete was endowed with a high degree of gendered characteristics by the media, presenting the traditional female stereotype, and placing it in the traditional female role of "gentle" and "weak". In the mainstream concept of society, male sports culture was still the mainstream, and female athletes could not get rid of their final image of returning to family responsibility.

With the increase in the number of female athletes and the modernization of the sports field, there had been a breakthrough in the image of female athletes. Among them, Li Na was a representative example. As an athlete who was mainly promoted as a female national hero, Li's media image highlighted her health as wise, international, and stylish. Although she was questioned by the media and the masses for her free personality and bold speech, she broke the stereotype of previous tennis players, showing a different image of a female athlete of herself, which was different from the traditional one [6].

Secondly, the portrayal of multidimensional personalities enriches the characterization of the athletes. Mann et al. contribute a scale that had seven dimensions of celebrity image by analyzing the media content of film and sports stars: social and ethical responsibility, life and style, professional capabilities, perspective towards celebrity's profession, orientation towards fans, attractive physique, and public image. They believe that all these factors were important in today's celebrities [8].

The Rio Olympics could be destined to be a sign of the change in China's Olympic culture. According to the relevant media content of Fu Yuanhui, Zhang Guowei, Liang Xinping, and the women's volleyball players, the Chinese athletes had largely overturned the fixed image of them, and the personalized label had been becoming more obvious and accepted by the public [9]. The Olympic spirit shown by the media image of these young generations of athletes had changed the "gold medal only" ethos in Chinese public opinion. This change was more significant in those famous medal athletes. Take Lina as an example. Cheng states that it was Li Na herself, her management team, and the commercial media that created a new media image of athletes with ideas, personalities, and independent consciousness for the public. In the media content of Lina's retirement, network sports media not only tracked the progress of Li's retirement and integrated a large number of historical data about Li's career, but also richly showed Li's family background behind her achievement, fighting experience, and love story. They even reproduced comments from different media to ensure multiple views coexist. Cheng regards this as an advance in online media coverage [10].

2.2. The Commercialization of Athletes' Media Image

Commercialization was growing throughout the sports industry, and the entertainment orientation of media on the topic of athletes had become common as the image of athletes was the reflection of the sports culture of an era. The growing public demand for entertainment consumption had prompted the media to track down professional star athletes, many of whom often go beyond sports or political propaganda. More reports changed from Sports News to Entertainment News. As Guo claims, among the messages on famous athletes such as world swimming champion Sun Yang and Guo Jingjing, the number of entertainment news was far larger than traditional sports news [11].

In traditional mass media content, sports stars not only remind the audience of teamwork and fair competition but also largely represent national symbols such as playing the national anthem and raising the national flag [12]. Xu took the example of Rong Guotuan as an example to illustrate the political significance of athletes winning the championship. Rong Guo Tuan's victory was even praised by the national premier and mentioned during the national holiday, while the process of the game was considered to be less important in the media [13]. However, with the development of social media, the trend toward the commercialization of the sports industry had become more apparent. The media hopes that well-known athletes will be included in the "Internet celebrities" category and spread various information within the framework of sports reporting and entertainment, to attract the public's attention. For example, the market officials of QuanMin TV said that when they choose the Olympic stars to cooperate with, they first require these sports stars to have their own "star features", they will choose sports stars that were interactive and had distinct personalities [12]. Famous athletes such as Liu Guoliang and Zhang Jike had also been Internet celebrities. Among them, Zhang had more than 8 million followers on Weibo, which Xu believes had a positive effect on promoting table tennis but weakens their image as athletes [14].

In the process of shaping the image of athletes, the network media also paid excessive attention to entertainment and lack of objectivity and rational reporting. The media content about professional athletes was mixed with much negative information. To some extent, the negative news greatly meets the needs of the audience for entertainment and meets the needs of some audiences nowadays. At the same time, this was harmful to the presentation of athletes' values. Therefore, it was particularly important to play the positive role of network media in shaping the sports image of athletes in information communication.

3. Factors

3.1. Richer Communication Medium

Traditional media such as newspapers, outside, communication, radio, TVs, and network television were once the primary platforms for athlete media images [15]. With the development of Internet technology, the emergence of increasingly new media platforms such as Weibo and Tik Tok had brought a certain impact on traditional news and opportunities [16]. The development of multiple media platforms had also provided a platform for the presentation of athletes' media images and was the reason for their diversification and commercialization. For example, traditional television was a one-way medium. However, with the rapid development of Internet technology, the use of Internet communication on computers had made it possible to provide personalized programs [17]. Different media had different communication characteristics, which in turn had contributed to the classification of the image of athletes. For example, in traditional media such as television and radio, athletes mainly present their image by their performance on the field of play. While in fragmented information platforms such as Tik Tok, athletes' interviews or daily life were more often shown and focused on, and on platforms such as B-site, athletes share their knowledge of fitness skills.

3.2. Diverse Communication Subjects

The differences between the new media environment and the traditional media era were mainly reflected in the fact that the communication subjects had changed from one-to-many to many-to-many. In the traditional media era, it was difficult to interchange roles between the media and the recipient, and it was often a single message sent by the communicator. However, with the advent of the new media era, the subject and the audience of the athlete's media image had gradually shifted from oppositional to interchangeable. They could be both the subject of communication and the subject of reception. In the new media era, the characteristic of "everyone was the subject of communication" makes the subjects of communication more diversified. Everyone was an information disseminator. In addition to some official platforms, some self-published blogs, athletes, and even individuals who re-tweet content on Weibo had become the disseminators of their media images. For example, Gu Ailing, world champion of women's freestyle skiing at this year's Beijing Winter Olympics, had more than six million followers on microblog alone. The different preferences of individual communicators also explain the trend of diversified communication of athletes' media images to a certain extent.

As an important media of sports communication, official media played a vital role at any time. For example, CCTV Sports Channel (CCTV-5) had become an important platform for people to watch sports events in the era of traditional media. In the era of Internet new media development, people could pick up their mobile phones at any time to watch live replays of events or directly open the microblog of CCTV Sports to get the latest sports information. Traditional media were developing rapidly in today's society, and media convergence significantly impacts news dissemination. Convergence media was a concept that integrates the advantages of traditional media and new media. For example, during the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency used high-tech technologies to broadcast sports events, giving full play to the advantages of convergence media to bring an unprecedented interactive experience to the audience [18].

3.3. Broader Audience

The media portrayal of athletes is heavily influenced by their audience. With the growth of China's economy and the popularity of the Internet, the audience had changed considerably, which was also

one of the reasons for the transformation of athletes' media images. Starting from McGuire's theoretical paradigm and combined with the changing situation of integrated media in the new era, it found that the audience of the media had changed a lot from 2000 to 2020, and the range of the social media's age had become wider. To sum up, the specific reasons were as follows [19].

Firstly, the ways of media development were changing now, and the audience's age range had become wider. With the popularity of smartphones and 4G networks, live streaming platforms like TikTok began to rise and soon became popular throughout China. It had also led to the gradual change of the media from TV to smartphones and computers, leading to a wider age range. Then it meant that people from young to old could find content suitable for them on short video platforms, thus increasing the scope of the whole audience. Moreover, because of the fast times, many people, especially the young people under stress, hardly had a whole period to watch the overall process. Compared with the paper media, they may be more willing to watch the short video platform to shorten the reading time. According to the Us Media Audience Statistics Report, as of December 2020, traditional media, including television and radio, were no longer the most widely available media among American adults, as audience numbers continue to decline. Instead, streaming had the broadest audience. Recalling a report from the previous year, radio and television still had an overwhelmingly high voice among adults, even as the audience share of traditional media in the United States was shrinking. By June 2020, weekly hit rates for all digital media types had increased to some extent, while traditional media in the United States had shrunk slightly.

In the current analysis, streaming video was the most viewed and most-watched form of media, with about 80 percent (79 percent) of American adults watching streaming video every week. In addition, about 78.9 percent of American adults used social media at least once a week. It meant that streaming not only outstrips traditional American television, but social media outperforms terrestrial radio by 0.8% [20]. The age diversity of users of social media and the fragmented nature of its information had, to some extent, contributed to the categorization of the presentation of athletes' media images, which was the presentation of content that was specific to different age groups.

Secondly, there was a gradual gender balance in the audience for athletes' media images. In the past, social media platforms were more likely to target men, especially in sports, because at that time, men had a higher social status. At the same time, women were considered more appendages of men, so most TV programs were designed for men. Nowadays, with the development of the time, women's social status had improved, becoming the main force of consumption. In addition, the appearance of female sports stars such as Gu Ailing and Fu Yuanhui led more women to pay attention to and began to try sports, so the audience of media had gradually added female factors and images of masculinity [21].

Thirdly, due to the development of social media, print media status may not be as high as before. It also represented a media reduced barriers to entry. In the past, only 30 s and 40 s intellectuals may read news articles and reports, and now more people were using tablets, laptops, and smartphones to catch up on what was going on. Newspapers should make use of the advantages of the Internet and mobile media, taking advantage of the social, retrieval, and big data functions of new media, producing content suitable for cross-media, and creating digital platforms. It meant as long as you could see could hear, all the people could share the news and read, lowering the threshold of the reading audience so that the audience could understand the news and other topics even if they were not so highly educated [22]. So, the whole audience's age range will be wider, and participation will be higher. That was why compared with the social media from 2000, the media today could be much broader in 2020, moving from a limited audience to universal participation.

4.   Conclusion

With the public's increasing interest in sporting events and the widespread availability of digital media, gold medal athletes were being presented to a wider audience through mass media. As a specific type of media image, the media image of the athlete was considered to be largely associated with social change. It could reflect changes in contemporary media culture and the characteristics of mass media communication. This paper discussed the changes in the media representation of athletes after 2000 and analyses the reasons for them through three aspects: richer communication medium, diverse communication subjects, and a broader audience.

The media presentation of athletes was overall diversified and commercialized. With the change of the sports culture, the personality of the athletes became highlighted in the media, and the stereotyped image of athletes, especially female athletes, had been largely replaced by diversified ones. Besides, with the marketization of the media and sports flew, athletes' image-building process in the media should be commercialized instead of completely led by political purposes.

However, although the media presentation of athletes had evolved considerably, there were still some problems in the communication process. Firstly, the stereotypes about athletes had not been eliminated. Besides, some new problems had emerged, such as the excessive commercialization leading to a distorted image of athletes, which could be harmful to their careers, and too much unconfirmed negative information that could mislead viewers and hurt teenagers. Therefore, both the public and athletes should actively respond to the effects and problems of public opinion through media. Identifying and correcting problems in the communication would better promote the spread and development of Chinese sporting culture and disseminate athletes' media images. In addition, the Olympics had positioned itself as an important form of education, providing realistic and vivid models to young people around the world to achieve educational results, which provides a basic idea for the media to shape the public image of well-known athletes. Showcasing athletes in this direction helped the media properly portray athletes as public icons.

In the modern media era, with consumers' rising subjective awareness, the constraints of their communication process could no longer be overlooked. First, non-professional topics such as athlete privacy and certain statements were frequently over-emphasized with the increase in information and coverage, as well as the diverse interests of viewers, This excessive attention leads to the dissemination of entertaining or commercialized information, which in turn leads to the neglect of the authenticity of the athletes themselves [23]. In addition, the diversification of communication media, in addition to official reports such as television news, personal media accounts, or the athletes' media accounts were also important ways of communicating their media images. Besides their performance on the field of play, athletes' private behavior and activities also attract a great deal of attention from their audiences, which places a higher demand on their ethics. Therefore, the mass media should take up the corresponding responsibility when shaping the media image of athletes, focusing on shaping their positive image of enterprising and challenging work. At the same time, the mass media should strengthen their control over the shaping content, so that their idolized communication could play a more positive role, set a positive example for the public, and transmit positive energy to society [4]. Secondly, athletes themselves should be clear about their social responsibilities and convey a healthy and positive media image to their audiences to enhance their image and social recognition. At the same time, audiences themselves should have a sense of social responsibility, constantly improve their media literacy, screen relevant reports, and choose positive content for dissemination.

The study still had some limitations. Firstly, although this study explores the changes in the media representation of athletes in some aspects generally, there were many places where in-depth research could be carried out as the media image of the character was a complex topic. Besides, it

would also be valuable to discuss some of the features and issues in the current media representations of athletes that were identified in this study. For example, a focused analysis of the image of athletes on particular social media platforms or mainstream media could provide a more concrete answer to how and why images are changing.

In the future, researchers could address the shortcomings of the current athlete media presentation, for example, by examining the text and finding solutions to the negative portrayal of athletes. In addition, subsequent research could address the current changes that athletes' media images could more easily impact youth audiences. Social learning or planned behavior theories could examine how athletes' media images influence the daily behavior of youth.

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