

Social Media Image Construction and Communication of Sports Athletes

-- Take Eight Chinese Table Tennis Athletes on *Weibo* as an Example

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Abstract. With the development of social media, it has become more and more a distinctive phenomenon for sports athletes to present themselves and spread sports culture through operating personal social media accounts. As the national sport of China, table tennis has long enjoyed widespread attention, and the athletes are also the focus of the public. In this regard, this paper selected eight Chinese table tennis athletes in different growth periods in a balanced manner according to the demographic approach. With the content and text analysis methods, the paper collects data and text from their social media accounts represented by Weibo, and analyzes the content and effects from aspects of sports communication, health communication, brand communication, social value communication and entertainment daily communication. After analyzing the current operation and exposed shortcomings of the personal social media of sports athletes represented by them, the paper puts forward three feasible suggestions: "build a good media image, convey positive energy actively," "raise the awareness of media management, explore the possibilities of cross-border" and "enhance the ability of media operation, create differentiated personalities," to contribute media power to the in-depth implementation of the "Healthy China" Initiative and the development of China's sports industry.

Keywords: Sports Communication; Table Tennis Athletes; Weibo; Social Media Operation.

1. Introduction

In the era of social media, the image of athletes is not only on the field, but also on the screen, which has become an important channel for athletes to show themselves, spread values, and carry out fan interaction. As a popular sport, table tennis is the national sport of China with many supporters and fans. Through the social media platform represented by *Weibo*, table tennis athletes can interact with netizens and spread sports spirit, which not only helps to shape personal image and enhance commercial value, but also broadens the channels of sports communication, as well as the connotation and extension of sports culture.

This paper aims to study the construction and communication of social media images of eight Chinese table tennis athletes on *Weibo*. Therefore, by using content analysis and text analysis methods, data collection and content interpretation are carried out on the *Weibo* accounts of eight athletes at different growth periods. Then, content types, interaction methods and audience feedback of post samples are deeply analyzed. In addition, in the aspects of sports communication, health communication, brand communication, social value communication and entertainment daily communication, the operation strategy, image characteristics and communication effect of modern sports stars are understood.

In order to promote the integrated development of the sports industry and the new media industry, this paper adheres to the problem-oriented approach and puts forward feasible suggestions on optimizing the athletes' social media operation and promoting the popularization of sports, so as to provide referable suggestions for sports practitioners and communicators.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Methods

Content analysis. This paper mainly takes the *Weibo* content of eight Chinese table tennis athletes as the research models, and sets up several research categories. In terms of the time range, considering that the content is influenced by a variety of subjective and objective factors of communicators and audiences, as well as the outside society, a longer period can reflect the phenomenon more comprehensively. Thus, the paper exhausts all the available samples, extracts the samples published between September 2010 and January 2024, compiles statistics including but not limited to the frequency of date, social interaction, etc., and finds the correlation between the variables after the artificial noise reduction screening and the credibility test.

Text analysis. How do the nation's top athletes engage in personalized expression and influence audiences through social media? This involves deep textual interpretation. Therefore, this paper examines the content, structure and function of their posts on *Weibo*, as well as the differentiated expression styles, posting habits and interaction preferences to explain the deeper meanings.

2.2. Sample Selection

This paper chooses *Weibo* accounts of eight national table tennis athletes as the research objects for three reasons: First, according to the data released by China New Media Conference, as the world's largest Chinese social all-media platform, *Weibo* had 523 million monthly active users and 229 million daily active users. With such a huge user group and wide social influence, *Weibo* can be considered as the most representative and comprehensive social platform. Second, as a platform for recording personal life and growth history, *Weibo* is one of the social media platforms used by many sports stars for a long period of time, and their sample data of socialization and personalized expression are relatively rich. Third, as a commercialization platform, *Weibo* provides market-oriented opportunities for sports stars to carry out brand cooperation, promote and endorse products, and also boosts the promotion of themselves and their sports career.

Table 1. Eight Chinese table tennis athletes and their *Weibo* information

Name	Sex	Birth year	Nickname	Register Date	Followers (million)	Post (pieces)	
						Total	Visible
Ma Long	Male	1988	captain龙	2012/09/11	8.354	487	23
Xu Xin	Male	1990	许昕	2010/10/10	5.513	476	476
Ding Ning	Female	1990	丁宁	2010/09/07	3.065	507	507
Liu Shiwen	Female	1991	刘诗雯Sunny	2010/10/12	2.514	356	356
Lin Gaoyuan	Male	1995	Eric林高远	2012/01/14	1.003	303	303
Wang Manyu	Female	1999	王曼昱	2012/07/09	0.598	117	117
Sun Yingsha	Female	2000	孙颖莎	2014/02/26	2.742	103	103
Wang Chuqin	Male	2000	王楚钦__	2013/03/03	2.186	227	31

As Table 1 shows, this paper synthesizes the personal information, industry influence, and *Weibo* operation of famous Chinese table tennis athletes, and finally selects eight table tennis athletes with a total of 1,916 visible posts on *Weibo* as the research sample. Then, the paper carries out a combination of qualitative and quantitative research on the content, type and influence of individual posts, to examine the athletes' social media operation characteristics, persona portraits and dissemination effects.

2.3. Class Analysis

After obtaining 1,916 samples, the subsequent coding analysis is conducted according to the following categories.

Table 2. Tertiary indicators and categories for the statistics of the eight athletes' *Weibo*

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3 indicators
Basic information	Avatar	1=Photo on field,2=Photo in life,
	Profile	1=Business contact,2=Motto,3=Other,4=None
	Authentication	1=Yes,2=No
Content presentation	Content	1=Sports communication (i. Event news, ii. Communication), 2=Health communication, 3=Brand communication, 4=Social value communication (i. social identity, ii. Public welfare and charity), 5=Entertainment daily communication
	Type	1=Graphic,2=Video,3=Q&A
	Tag	1=Yes,2=No

3. Case Analysis of Athletes' Social Media Image

3.1. Basic Information

3.1.1. Nickname

In cyberspace, a user's nickname can represent both personal information and characteristics, as well as interests and values, carrying the user's self-presentation and belonging identity in the social network. As Table 1 shows, the nicknames of eight athletes all reflect personal characteristics, sports programs and public images, which can be divided into two patterns:

First, as public figures, seven athletes prefer to create nicknames with their Chinese name or a combination of Chinese and English names. Second, Ma Long, the captain of the men's national table tennis team, combines the English word captain with the single word "Long" in his name, echoing the outside world's name for him. It is very clever to weaken the simplicity of direct search and reading, and then deepen the public impression with uniqueness.

3.1.2. Avatar

As the visual focus of self-presentation and interpretation by others, an avatar is also an important element for users to build the social media presence. The avatars of eight athletes are all themselves and can be divided into two types:

First, snapshots of the field when playing, highlight the identity and occupation. This type is mostly medium and close shot, athletes wear jerseys printed with their names, with front faces or backs. Second, life or image photos help show the multiple selves. Liu Shiwen uses a selfie, Wang Chuqin uses a photo taken during travel, and Lin Gaoyuan's avatar is a formal photo of attending a business event, showing a living and diversified personality.

3.1.3. Profile

Weibo's profile is an important window for self-presentation and personality expression. The profiles of eight athletes can be categorized into four types:

Liu Shiwen, Xu Xin and Ding Ning write business contacts in their profiles. Lin Gaoyuan uses the motto "Suffering is the priceless treasure of the strong and the bottomless abyss of the weak," to convey the spirit of sports. Sun Yingsha and Wang Manyu only indicate the identity of the "athlete". Ma Long and Wang Chuqin do not have profiles.

3.1.4. Authentication

Authentication of *Weibo* is an important measure to protect information security, safeguard the rights and interests of celebrities and the general public, and improve the credibility of social media. The eight athletes have all completed real-name authentication on *Weibo*, widely disseminating the dynamic views of opinion leaders, establishing public image, and enhancing the commercial value of their accounts.

3.2. Presentation of Weibo Content

The self-presentation and persona construction of sports stars on *Weibo* mainly rely on the content they post and their interactions with other users. Posts are presented in various forms, including combinations of graphics, videos, articles and other elements. After analyzing the samples, the findings are as follows.

3.2.1. Content: Rich and Diverse Themes Show the Charm of Sports.

The content and theme of *Weibo* are the core of users' self-presentation, which determines the content, quality and effect of self-presentation, and is the focus of users' "front-stage" performance. As shown in Table 2, after classifying and analyzing the 1,916 samples, the content belongs to five categories, with rich and diversified self-presentation styles, which can help the sports stars create an ideal, real and vivid opinion leader image that meets the public's expectations.

3.2.1.1 Sports Communication

Table 3. "Sports Blogger News" Automatic *Weibo* post of eight athletes

Athletes	Numbers	Main Year
Ma Long	3	2023
Xu Xin	2	2021
Ding Ning	0	/
Liu Shiwen	3	2021
Lin Gaoyuan	21	2023
Wang Chuqin	13	2023
Sun Yingsha	48	2023
Wang Manyu	29	2023

1) Sports News

Sports *Weibo* accounts disseminate event information in two ways.

First, relying on the *Weibo* "sports blogger news" automatic post function, every major event results announced at the node, there is no lag, accurate in the award-winning athletes' *Weibo*, directly their results of first, second and third place. This immediacy and rapidity is one of the essential requirements of sports news dissemination. As shown in Table 3, especially in Sun Yingsha's account, from January 2021 to January 2024, the award-winning automatic posts of the major events amounted to 48 times, and the information was the most intensive in 2023 due to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on the competition period. "Sports blogger news" has a fixed format and content to set up an "electronic performance archive" due to authority, timeliness and intelligence, and sets an electronic channel for the audience's emotional dissemination and social interaction to not only timely access to the results of the game, but also realize star chasing, which realizes the optimal reorganization of the audience's attention.

Table 4. Original Tournament *Weibo* posts of eight athletes

Athletes	Contents	Forms	Type of pictures	Frequency	Post after games
	1=Review 2=Thought 3=Thanks	1=Text or photo 2=Graphic	1=Self & partner 2=Team 3=Scene	1=Race day 2=Next day 3=No post	1=Yes 2=No
Ma Long	1, 2	2	2	3	2
Xu Xin	1, 2	2	1, 2	1	1
Ding Ning	2	2	2	3	2
Liu Shiwen	2	2	1	3	2
Lin Gaoyuan	1, 2	2	1, 2, 3	2	1
Wang Chuqin	2	2	1, 2	2	2
Sun Yingsha	1, 3	1, 2	2	2	2
Wang Manyu	2	2	1, 2	3	2

Second, athletes release original *Weibo* based on the event, covering post-game reviews, feelings, thanks, etc. As shown in Table 4, all eight athletes have released post-event summaries in graphic form. Among them, Wang Chuqin posts after almost every match. In addition, within 4 hours after the finals of the 26th Asian Championships, the 19th Asian Games, and the Table Tennis Mixed Team World Cup held in the past six months, Ma Long released three post-game summaries in graphic form, with a relatively fixed content framework: a sentence summarizing the feelings, followed by a sincere expression of thanks to his teammates and fans, and indicating the Chinese team will work tirelessly to achieve further success as the captain of the men's team.

2) Communication and interaction among multi sports

Table 5. Interactions on *Weibo* of eight athletes

Athletes	Time	Form	Content	Objects and sports programs of interaction
	1=Race node 2=Daily time	1=Like & forward 2=Individual blogs 3=Comments	1=Media reports 2=About the event 3=Based on daily	
Ma Long	2	3	3	Liu Yuchen (Badminton)
Xu Xin	2	2, 3	2, 3	Wu Dajing (Short Track Speed Skating), Chen Long, Huang Yaqiong (Badminton), Yan Junling (Soccer)
Ding Ning	1 (Hangzhou Asian Games), 2	1	2	Wu Jingyu (Taekwondo), Wang Yu (High Jump), Fu Yuanhui (Swimming)
Liu Shiwen	2	1	3	Feng Shanshan (Golf)
Lin Gaoyuan	1 (Tokyo Olympics)	1	1	Su Bingtian (Athletics)
Wang Chuqin	1, 2	3	2, 3	Yan An, Xue Fei (Table Tennis)
Sun Yingsha	1	3	2	Chen Qingchen (Badminton)
Wang Manyu	2	1	2, 3	Cha Xiaoxi (Table Tennis)

As the national ball of China, table tennis occupies a prominent position in sports events, and the social interactions of table tennis athletes also continue to link up with athletes from different sports to convey the sports spirit of harmonious communion and friendship. As shown in Table 5, this is one of the important contents of their posts.

In addition to liking and forwarding official media reports and the athletes' post-match feelings, Xu Xin also creates a diversified social landscape through message interactions and selfies, especially on September 9, 2023, Xu Xin showed his child taking a photo with Zhang Zhizhen, China's No. 1 Tennis athlete, which showed the friendly personal image of the sportsman.

Moreover, cross-border participation in sports events has become a major highlight. On January 1, 2024, Liu Shiwen posted a photo on her *Weibo* account that she was the starter for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Women's Marathon, with the caption "Welcoming the first day of the New Year with running", which conveyed the valuable traits of women pursuing a healthy life and realizing their values.

3.2.1.2 Health Communication

Table 6. Health Communication on *Weibo* of eight athletes

Athletes	Theme	Time	Form	Frequency
	1=Sports spirit 2=National fitness 3=Sports Exercise 4=Other	1=Fixed 2=Non-fixed	1=Text 2=Video 3=Other	1=Annual 2=Non-annual
Ma Long	1, 3	1	2	1
Xu Xin	1	1	1, 2	1
Ding Ning	1	1	2, 3	1
Liu Shiwen	1	1	1, 2	1
Lin Gaoyuan	2, 3	1	1	1
Wang Chuqin	2	1	1	1
Sun Yingsha	1	1	1	1
Wang Manyu	1, 2	1	1	1

The construction of a healthy China and the national fitness program are prompting the integration of health communication and sports communication, which realizes a bidirectional linkage on the social media of sports athletes. As shown in Table 6, all eight athletes play a leading role in conveying sports skills, popularizing fitness knowledge, and promoting sportsmanship. In the past years, when the National Fitness Day and other nodes, Lin Gaoyuan encouraged the public to "move up" with his videos of fancy rope skipping, and Ding Ning made GIF to share correct ways of warming up with netizens. At the same time, the paper finds that around June 20 every year, a considerable number of China's athletes' *Weibo* accounts will forward a video released by the official blog of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) themed on "Olympic Day", and the "Ode to the Spirit of Chinese Sports" theme video released by the official blog of the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC), through the athletes' community, to the public.

3.2.1.3 Brand Communication

When athletes are called "sports stars", their symbolic value and cultural attributes begin to emerge. Because of the healthy image and positive mental outlook, sports stars are often popular candidates for advertising endorsement. On *Weibo* of the eight athletes, there are commercial advertisements for the Li-Ning brand, among which Ding Ning takes the initiative to keep in touch with Li-Ning's official information at a frequency of 2-3 posts per year, such as liking new products, interacting with the

brand's avatars, and striving for fans' benefits, etc. Liu Shiwen posts a higher number of advertisements, with a total of 15 commercial cooperation posts of 6 brands, especially during the Tokyo Olympics, she posted 4 advertisements for 3 brands. The period of the world's attention tournament is the intensive period of advertisement for table tennis athletes.

Table 7. Commercial Advertisements on *Weibo* of eight athletes

Athletes	Post (pieces)	Percent (%)	Type and quantity					Form
			Sports	Tech	Life	Food	Clothes	1=Forward,2=Self-publish, 3=Hard sell, 4=Recommendation
Ma Long	6	26.09	0	4	0	1	1	1, 2, 3
Xu Xin	17	3.57	2	5	1	2	1	1, 2, 3
Ding Ning	11	2.17	6	3	0	1	1	1, 2, 3, 4
Liu Shiwen	15	4.21	4	0	1	10	0	1, 2, 3
Lin Gaoyuan	5	1.65	5	0	0	0	0	1
Wang Chuqin	1	0.85	1	0	0	0	0	2
Sun Yingsha	3	2.91	0	3	0	0	0	2, 3
Wang Manyu	4	12.90	0	2	2	0	0	2, 3

In terms of the content design of endorsement advertisements, the brand features are highly compatible with the athletes' personalities, and then the symbolism of sports stars is transferred to the brand, thus generating metaphorical symbols. For example, on August 28, 2023, Sun Yingsha's *Weibo* released a video advertising the gas water heater brand "Wanhe Electric" with the title "Where does your sense of achievement come from?" and the tagline "Getting a sense of achievement with development and companionship." the advertisement transitions from reviewing the personal growth history to the development history of the enterprise, realizing the unity of personal characteristics and brand selling points. Another example is that on January 14, 2022, Italian luxury brand Prada announced that Ma Long's perseverance and pursuit of excellence complemented the sportsmanship Prada has always advocated and that Ma Long had become the first athlete brand ambassador of Prada. What's more, it launched the "P Family Ping Pong Challenge" online campaign. On *Weibo*, Ma Long also actively forwarded the activities of Prada's shows and publicized Prada's seasonal new products, further expanding the brand's influence and realizing the breakthrough cooperation of fashion and sports.

In terms of personal branding, some sports athletes utilize their identity to shape their brand, which is a long-lasting way to realization. A good example of this is "Xu Xin Sports: Xuperman Sports". "Xuperman" originated from how Adam Bobrow, a commentator for the International Ping Pong Federation (IPPF) called Xu Xin. In January 2023, Xu Xin established the table tennis training centre in Shanghai, which combines training and experience, peripheral sales and leisure to create China's leading ping-pong education and lifestyle experience brand. From preparation to opening, Xu Xin has been updating his *Weibo* and actively forwarding the content of the centre's official blog, naturally communicating the brand's "Happy Table Tennis" philosophy to the public.

In general, sports athletes can make good use of social media platforms to carry out commercial communication, which helps to realize the two-way empowerment and win-win progress of commercial value and personal image.

3.2.1.4 Social Value Communication

Famous sports athletes are endowed with more social recognition and identity, thus influencing and driving the audience. For example, in 2022, Liu Shiwen was elected as the president of the Athletes' Commission of the International Table Tennis Federation (FITT). One year later, she visited the FITT as a representative, and published a summary of her work on *Weibo*, expressing that she was happy to work with her colleagues in the FITT and that she would "continue to run in the love of table tennis", thus promoting the development of table tennis in China with her practical actions. In 2022, Ding Ning, as a delegate to the National People's Congress, released photos of her participation and accepted an interview with the mainstream media, stating that she "was honoured to be here, and will contribute the strength to accelerating the construction of a competitive sports nation and the national fitness program", which conveyed her view of actively engaging in the promotion of the sports industry.

Famous sports athletes also bear the important responsibility of participating in public welfare and charity, shaping a positive image and guiding social trends, and "enhancing information exchange with all sectors of society, and obtaining soft public welfare reports and hard advertising from public opinion media". For example, on his 28th birthday in 2016, Ma Long launched the "I and My Table" public welfare activity on *Weibo*, promising to donate table tennis tables to 10 remote elementary schools on his birthday every year. So far, the activities have persisted for seven years driven by Ma Long, many fans involved in the "sail plan for students [table tennis public welfare fund from Ma Long's fans]", donations totalled more than 1 million yuan. In addition, Ding Ning released a post about her participation in the public welfare exhibition, focusing on a group of patients with serious illnesses, while Lin Gaoyuan forwarded the video of the fan club recording his donation of a rehabilitation room for young children with the caption, "I will insist on doing public welfare activities, and I hope to be able to help more people." Public welfare and charity activities connect the field of play, the Internet and social reality, and sports athletes utilize the long-term effect of sportsmanship to fulfil their social responsibility through practical actions and play a positive role in leading public figures.

3.2.1.5 Entertainment Daily Communication

Media now has the attribute of pan-entertainment, which provides an opportunity for sports athletes to present themselves across circles. Meanwhile, in China, the State General Administration of Sport's policy of relaxing the management of athletes' participation in commercial activities, so sports champions have been involved in cultural and entertainment undertakings or diversified their development, or even transformed themselves into entertainment stars. The entertainment communication on *Weibo* of the eight athletes is mainly divided into two aspects.

First, recreational activities. Athletes are no longer confined to a single field of sports competition, but through variety shows, film and television performances, etc., to show their diversified charms and talents. Among them, Xu Xin's cross-border development is the most typical: as a flying guest, he participated in the outdoor reality show *Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha* and *Our Good Life*, where he played table tennis with folk masters. He also participated in *I'm a Singer* to show his singing talent, and was even invited to the 2023 CCTV New Year's Eve Gala, truly doing well in both recreation and sports. In contrast, Ding Ning was involved in more cultural activities. For example, she was invited to participate in the global Z generation sports forum, as well as the CCTV "Champion talk: from the field of play to work," to share the story of life more than just victory and defeat. She also appeared in the Golden Eagle Cartoon Channel's sports section to share a unique insight into sports in the country's first sports talk show *Ring Ring Ring Ring Ring*. In addition, Ding Ning has interactions with many entertainment artists on *Weibo*, such as taking part in the Li-Ning brand micro-reality show *Ping Pong, Please Take That* with Xiao Zhan, watching Chen Weiting's concert, and successfully having interactions with her idol Zhu Yilong.

Second, daily entertainment. Sports athletes can also share personalized and life-oriented content from backstage on *Weibo*'s middle area. One is personal life, through displaying personalities and

hobbies, can show the real state. For example, Liu Shiwen often shares her fitness and travelling routines; Ding Ning shares her delicacy and books, and sends blessings on International Women's Day and other occasions to fans, conveying a positive and optimistic attitude towards life. The other is family life, which shows a harmonious atmosphere by posting daily routines with family members. For example, nearly 70% of Xu Xin's *Weibo* posts record beautiful moments with his wife and child, presenting the image of a father who deeply loves his family and is full of a sense of responsibility, which enhances the affinity of public figures.

3.3. Type: Graphic-based, In Line with the Platform's Functions

Table 8. Distribution and proportion of *Weibo* types of eight athletes

Athletes	Post (pieces)		Graphic		Video		Headline article	
	Total	Visible	Post (pieces)	Percent (%)	Post (pieces)	Percent (%)	Post (pieces)	Percent (%)
Ma Long	487	23	18	78.26	5	21.70	0	0
Xu Xin	476	476	421	88.40	47	9.90	1	0.20
Ding Ning	507	507	475	93.70	15	3.00	2	0.40
Liu Shiwen	356	356	344	96.63	12	3.37	2	0.60
Lin Gaoyuan	303	303	282	93.10	21	6.93	1	0.33
Wang Manyu	117	117	106	90.60	11	9.40	0	0
Sun Yingsha	103	103	88	85.40	15	14.60	1	0.97
Wang Chuqin	227	31	25	78.60	6	21.40	0	0

The content type combining pictures and text occupies a prominent position on table tennis athletes' *Weibo*, especially Liu Shiwen's relevant posts account for 96.6%. As shown in Table 8, with the rise of new forms such as short videos and live broadcasts, sports athletes have gradually shifted to a multi-dimensional communication mode, which is mainly based on graphics and text, supplemented by new media means.

The headline article is a special content form of *Weibo*. With the characteristics of detailed content, authoritative subjects, and profound communication, it allows users to publish long articles and add multi-media elements such as pictures and videos, which will be examined and approved before they can be displayed on the home page of the user's *Weibo*. Five athletes forward headline articles on specific topics, for example, on June 1, 2023, Sun Yingsha forwarded the headline article "China Table Tennis Team Conducts Special Training, Calls on Fans to Give Rational Attention" released by COC, and suggested fans "paying attention to the field of play and passing on more positive energy." On November 15, 2022, Liu Shiwen forwarded the article of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) announcing her election as a member of the new ITTF Athletes Committee, stating that she "will do the best to contribute to the development of table tennis". On October 14, 2022, Lin Gaoyuan forwarded the article of the World Table Tennis Federation's release of the finalist list for the Xinxiang World Cup, expressing his gratitude for this opportunity.

3.4. Tag: Highlight Personality

Tag is a flexible, interesting and distinctive way to set and categorize topics in cyberspace. As the "technical incarnation" of "data flow" and platform algorithms in front of the screen, tags not only imply an "indexing" device for a topic or content but also carry a rich connotation of publicity. As unique marks, tags can display the owner's personality traits, expand the influence on social media, and establish closer ties with their fans.

Table 9. Topic tag on *Weibo* of two athletes

Athletes	Tag	Creating time	Read (billion)	Discussion (million)	Interaction (million)	Original post (pieces)
Ma Long	Ma Long's Ping Pong Time	June 2022	2	5.3	41.2	1803
Xu Xin	Xu Xin's Happy Ping Pong	November 2023	0.06	0.4	1.4	7

In addition, two athletes create tags. #Ma Long's Ping Pong Time# shares Ma Long's fitness and training routines in the form of vlogs, with the topic's readership reaching over 100 million and a single video broadcasting nearly 4 million, and his fans posting all kinds of content under the topic, with more than 1,800 pieces of original posts. Similarly, #Xu Xin's Happy Ping Pong# shows the side of the "national ping pong comedian" and shares the idea of happy ping pong with fans.

4. Suggestions

The reason why stars made by various media can become stars is essentially a kind of media social performance. The personal *Weibo* of sports athletes are not only the window for image shaping, but also the bridge for fan interaction and sports culture dissemination, which is an important part of sports communication in a broad sense. However, in actual operation, some problems have been exposed, for which three suggestions will be put forward in the following.

4.1. Build a Good Media Image, Convey Positive Energy Actively

The *Weibo* accounts of the eight athletes are rich in content, involving sports culture, physical and mental health, commercial endorsement, recreation and entertainment and other diverse categories, conveying positive and inspiring spiritual power, with a wide influence, and their words and deeds in cyberspace have a profound impact on the public, especially on the youth.

Some of the fans bring unhealthy habits into the sports circle, so that the star-chasing behavior is out of control. In October 2023, a video about Wang Chuqin rebuked a photographer helping fans take photos of Wang in the airport, went viral. On the evening of the 14th, he released a statement through his fan club, calling for "the boycott of the long-term following and shooting." Its active voice to set up a "civilized and rational star chasing" correct public opinion guidance, triggered the public attention on fan culture and the heated debate about the proxy and following shooting behaviour. Many mainstream media carried out a profound review, which has a far-reaching impact on promoting the legalization and standardization of sports stargazing.

4.2. Raise the Awareness of Media Management, Explore the Possibilities of Cross-Border

The *Weibo* operations of the eight athletes show different dynamics: Liu Shiwen and Ding Ning insist on high-frequency updates and rich content, continuing to attract audiences. While in 2023, among 17 posts released by Wang Manyu, four were active updates, rest were automatic posts with an interval of up to four months. Due to the variable update frequency, large span and basically no interactive communication, it is difficult to obtain stable attention and cross-circle dissemination.

As the social media represented by *Weibo* becomes more and more important in public figures' self-presentation and social interaction, there is a particular need to enhance the media management awareness and ability to deal with emergencies of sports athletes and their agent teams. Xu Xin is continuously expanding the content, increasing the frequency of updates, and maintaining positive interactions, which turns "popularity" into "flow", and paves the way for career development and future transformation.

4.3. Enhance the Ability of Media Operation, Create Differentiated Personalities

When sports athletes enter the media and the public's vision, based on maintaining truthfulness and sincerity, they should fully explore personal characteristics, and create a three-dimensional image by setting up exclusive topics and flexibly utilizing live broadcasting.

On the 2023 Olympic Day, the eight athletes actively responded to the call and forwarded the official post of COC, but the text and format were single, all of which were "this #Olympic Day# + #move together#", dissolving the leadership of the opinion leaders' voices at the key node. If they took standardization into account while incorporating personal elements, such as appearing in recorded videos, posting vivid pictures and stylized text, the publicity effect would be even better. Therefore, in the operation and maintenance of athletes' posts, the initiative is particularly valuable, and it is only by constantly exploring suitable media development paths and constructing real, vivid and stable personal images that they can realize the long-term development of professional empowering online, cross-border sports communication and multi-line construction.

5. Conclusion

With social media becoming more and more interactive, sports athletes have a close connection with the public online. Therefore, it is an important compulsory course to carry out self-presentation, convey sportsmanship, and deal with the social opinions for famous athletes nowadays.

In this paper, the *Weibo* accounts of eight table tennis athletes in China were studied and analyzed in detail, including the basic information, content and communication effect. It is found that the eight athletes try to create a more vivid, three-dimensional and rich personal image on their social media, and their posts show the characteristics of overall positive development, rich and diversified themes, and types that match the platforms, but there are also problems such as single template of post content, lack of awareness and ability of media operation and management, and so on. By regulating and guiding the social media operation, content expression and value transmission of sports athletes and other public figures, we can further influence a wider range of audiences, transmit more scientific and rational sports knowledge, and build a harmonious and rational atmosphere for stargazers, so as to promote the benign development of China's sports communication industry.

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