Chapter 3
Self-Presentation, Interaction, and Marketing of Chinese Athletes on Social Media: A Study of Men’s National Table Tennis Team

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explored the characteristics of Chinese athletes’ self-presentation and para-social interaction on social media using Goffman’s self-presentation and para-social interaction theories. With the policies consciously supporting sport promotion in China, how to balance the commercialization and national glories, even the entertainment part is the linchpin of this. A content analysis of 552 Weibo posted by 10 male Chinese table tennis athletes was conducted. Results found that many Weibo posts are about interactivity (33%), especially with their teammates or coaches. Athletes also tend to be more personal on social media by posting amusing or emotional tweets. All showed that they present themselves as more of a marketing one but still under the frame of “the whole nation system.” Only a few Weibo were promotional (9%), indicating that the potential of achieving market objectives has not come to athletes’ full awareness. Suggestions are athletes enhance the relationship with fans so as to enlarge the influence of themselves and the sport per se.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of social media “has a profound impact on sports industry” (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 501). This impact also shows out in the image presented by athletes. Athletes pose their photos of training, daily life and interact with fans and friends (Du, 2014). A study found that Twitter provided a platform for athletes to present a “multi-faceted” self (Sanderson, 2013). Pegoraro (2010) concluded that most athletes’ tweets are related to their daily lives; fans and athletes could use Twitter for social and para-social interaction (PSI) (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen & Burch, 2014). It not only helps to strengthen the interaction with fans but also enhances their influences (Sanderson, 2011).

As Twitter’s typical social media platform counterpart, Sina Weibo itself has become a part of athletes’ image project (Guan, 2017). Sina Weibo is one of the most influential social media applications in China. By the end of 2010, the number of Weibo users reached 50 million and then embraced an explosive growth. According to the 39th China Internet Development Statistics Report, when WeChat, QQ and other social applications continue to develop, Sina Weibo still occupies 37.1% utilization (CNNIC, 2017). The dissemination of sports news is not confined to traditional media (Zhang, 2013) but widely spread on social media through interaction with athletes and fans. During the 2016 Summer Olympics held in Rio de Janeiro, Weibo became an important stage for sports news, athletes-fans interaction, sponsorship and promotion. According to the official data released by Sina, the amount of interaction on the Weibo reached 61.9 million on the opening day of Rio Olympics, and the total amount of reading of related topics amounted to 10 billion. Sun Yang, Zhu Ting, Zhang Jike and other athletes were mentioned the most. Also, a series of stickers and memes became popular. Fu Yuanhui, a swimmer, used “Hong Huang Zhi li” during an interview, or a kind of power that is mighty enough to manipulate the universe, to describe her hard work, which became a hit on the internet. The image of athlete has set out on the road to stardom.

However, there are few studies on the active use of Weibo by Chinese athletes and the interaction between athletes and fans. After the Rio Olympics, the national table tennis team members such as Zhang Jike and Ma long, gained a large number of fans through posting tweets or doing the live broadcast and TV shows. In 2017, a table tennis competition was named as “The Marvellous 12” (Di Biao Zui Qiang Shi’er Ren) rather than the traditional name of “Chinese Trials for the WTTC 2017 Table Tennis”. The former coach Liu Guoliang called it a strategy to catch more attention of young people, more importantly, adding some weight to the brand of National Table Tennis Team. The phenomenon of the national men’s table tennis team using social media for impression management thus is prominent and merits studies. This research, using Goffman’s self-presentation and the para-social interaction theory,
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