How are elite female athletes framed on China’s mainstream media: The case of Li Na

Boyan Wang
College of Liberal & Professional Studies, University of Pennsylvania Philadelphia, United States

Abstract—Sport is a male-dominated field where female athletes are relatively marginalized. This article applies the theory of framing to explore how a high-profile female athlete --Li Na-- is trivialized by the coverage of China’s mainstream media. The analysis reveals that stereotypical feminine roles, individualism and collectivism, and nationalism are common aspects regularly emphasized by media to undermine Li Na’s athletic achievement.

1. Introduction

Mainstream media is a mechanism available to the public through radio, print, television and the Internet under a particular social context [1]. Nowadays has become one of the main sources of information that inevitably and gradually shapes and regenerates peoples’ thoughts, attitudes, and values [2]. Sport as one of the most prominent fields is highly reported by mainstream media, coming along with the increasing reflections of gender inequality in this field [3]. Since masculinity is the dominant notion in sports, a majority of descriptions are created by mainstream media that prioritized male athletes’ masculinity and under-represented female athletes’ athleticism by accentuating their femininity [4]. This discrimination played no goodness in eliminating gender inequality for which placed greater value on men than on women in elite sports [5]. Men athletes with outstanding performance tend to be highlighted by their physical strength, long-term perseverance, and unique personality, whereas female athletes seem to be stressed by non-sport-relate aspects such as femininity, nationality and private lives [6].

Contents related to women’s sports on mainstream media cannot be generalized due to particular conditions of different countries. For instance, a history of immigration has led to multiple racial groups in the United States, whereas China relatively has homogenous populations due to demographic factors. While the issue of race relevant to women sports is frequently stressed by mainstream media from the United States, it is barely mentioned by China’s mainstream media [7]. According to the existing studies, tennis has been recognized as the most high-profile women’s individual sport in the world and the top-notch players have always been received enormous media attention [8][9]. A large body of studies have been examined by Western experts focusing on prominent women tennis players like Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova, and Naomi Osaka, whereas relevant examinations are still few from China’s perspectives. As a result, this study aims to analyze how China’s mainstream media framed the image of female athletes with the case study of Li Na, with the following objectives: (1) to retrieve the database of reports about Li Na from China’s published by mainstream media; (2) to analyze the retrieved data and to testify if the findings confirm or dispute the phenomena extensively discussed by existing academics.

2. Literature review

2.1 Perspectives of Western Sports Media

How female athletes have been trivialized by media has been extensively discussed by Western academics. High-profile female athletes like Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova are the targets of media with an emphasis on race and femininity rather than athleticism [10][11].

1) The Case of Serena Williams: Litchfield Chelsea et al (2018) discovered that Williams was constantly ridiculed at her “physicality” by sports sites such as Sky Sports and BBC (British Broadcasting Company) Sport. Abusive comments indicated that Williams had masculine body that made her more powerful than other female competitors, which excluded her from the conventional perspective of “women in sports”. Although Serena Williams is undeniably the most accomplished female tennis player in the open era, she has been subjected to insults because of her gender and race [12]. Thus, Litchfield’s study presented a clear indication that elite, world-class female athlete is trivialized [7].

2) The Case of Maria Sharapova: In contrast to Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova is “praised” by media as she fits in the Western traditional aestheticism of femininity. Nevertheless, Sharapova’s athletic
performance is consequently shaded by the stereotypes on feminine appearance [13]. Sharapova has always been the target of media with the highlight on her feminine attractiveness rather than exceptional athletic performance [5]. With the increasing marketability contributed by physical appearance, Sharapova’s athleticism is slightly undermined by media [14].

2.2 Perspectives of Asian Sports Media

Asian mainstream media is similarly obsessed with stressing the physique of female athletes [8][15]. Unlike Western media, nationalism and the significance of male partners are accentuated by Asian media. Especially in East Asia such as Japan and Korea where nationalism is the dominating ideology, female athletes’ triumphs have always been contributed to the nations’ glories rather than the promotion of gender equality [16]. For example, football has been regarded as a prevailing sport with a long history in Japan and Korea. Despite the fact that women's team has great prospects in competitions same as men’s team, dominant concentration of mainstream media is always on male athletes in football filed [17][18][19].

1) The Case of Naomi Osaka: Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka is frequently discussed around her race and national identity. Razack and Janelle (2021) in their studies analyzed the intolerable misogyny on media aimed at Osaka through the lens of the complexities of racial, national and diasporic identities [20]. Ho Michelle HS et al (2022) examined the advertisements’ representation of Osaka through the lens of gender, ethnicity, and nation, criticizing Nissin’s portrayal of Osaka as lighter-skinned and “kawaii” while ignoring her activism [21].

The above three cases (Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova and Naomi Osaka) are based on high-profile female athletes with both success in tennis and tremendous marketability. The existing analysis provided this study foundations of how female athletes are framed by mainstream media from Western perspectives and inspirations for presenting a case study of a specific high-profile Chinese female athlete.

2.3 Perspectives of China's Media

Most traditional feminine qualities undertaken by non-athlete women were applied by Chinese mainstream media to regularly stereotyped female athletes in socially acceptable ways [22]. Rather than highlighting athleticism, mainstream media emphasized female athletes’ emotional vulnerability, social gender roles, obedience to male coaches, and romantic relationships [23]. Since China is generally identified as a collectivist culture, female athletes’ success is regularly attributed to the contribution from nation rather than individual efforts [24]. Female athletes are thus also described as national pride in the construction of nationalism in the world [25].

The research of the how female athletes were framed by China’s mainstream media provides the foundation of relevant gender issues from China’s perspectives. Relating to the Western studies, the mainstream media’s preference from different countries on trivializing female athletes relatively varies. While race, sexuality, physicality and personality of female athletes are frequently discussed in Western countries [7][13], social (feminine) roles, responsibilities, national identities and contribution from male partners are the concentrations by Asian countries [15]. This difference provides inspiration for this study to present innovative analysis based on a case study of China’s female athlete that relate to the previous Western case studies so that complementing the existing findings from China’s perspectives.

3. Multiple research gaps

There are still much fewer studies on the mainstream media's coverage of Asian female athletes than there are in the West. Due to the last vestiges of patriarchy in late modernity, women’s sports participation in Asia still lags behind Western nations despite greater economic and social gains in society [19].

Studies specifically focused on individual women sports are very few since East nationalism and collectivism are valued more highly than individualism in Asia [20][26]. Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova, who are both frequently investigated by Western scholars only primarily serve to symbolize Western ideals. Though Naomi Osaka has been discussed, the cultural background and homogeneity exclude her from standing as a model for traditional Asian female athletes.

Comparing Chinese media viewpoints to Western, Japanese, and Korean academic studies, there are remarkably few relevant studies on female athletes, and even fewer case studies based on conversations about a specific, prominent player, like Li Na. Moreover, scholarly works on Li Na that focus on gender viewpoint to be less prevalent than those that discussed about individualism and nationalism [24][27].

Chinese scholars like Xu Qingru (2016) did discover extensive research on Li Na that was centered on gender discrimination from media coverage, however, this study only collected materials up until Li Na's second Grand Slam victory in 2014 [28]. Despite Li Na's professional tennis career came to an end after she retired in 2014, her influence as a legendary woman has endured. Li Na is still regularly mentioned by China’s mainstream media and invited to participate in various events that are broadcast on TV.

4. Theoretical underpinnings

4.1 The Theory of Framing

The theory of framing is frequently functioned in the research of communication [29][30]. It refers to the process by which the media creates a certain conception to redefine people's perceptions [31] and clarifies how media impacts public attitudes through framing incidents and circumstances in certain ways [32].
A significant body of research has demonstrated the influence of media frames on individuals’ opinions of issues [33]. Xu Qingru (2016) analyzed how Chinese media construct elite female athletes using framing theory for the better understanding of the socially constructed reality [28]. Oh Taeyeon et al (2021) investigated the relationship between printed media and digital media when covering a controversial political issue in sports using the lens of framing [34]. Ash Erin and Gregory A. (2020) examined the effects of social stereotypes framed by sports media though evaluating the difference of college admittance essay between White and Black athlete [35].

### 4.2 The Theory of Framing in this Research

Three conceptual respects are following that explain the relevant research, each of which provides the lens in the analysis of how China’s mainstream framed Li Na and shaped audiences’ conceptions of women’s sports.

1) **Feminine Roles:** Women have been shaped in traditional feminine roles such vulnerability, timidity, emotionality, lack of independence, and physical weakness for a long time. Regardless of the increasing unconventional images of successful women athletes that have shaken the traditional stereotypes, mainstream media tends to emphasize their feminine attributes since patriarchal ideals still predominate in the sports [6]. Female athletes’ being emotionally vulnerable and depending on their male partners are stereotypes that are particularly framed by mainstream media to showcase that they are mentally incapable of competing independently and lack of competence in handling the nerves and achieving success [36]. Family roles as a caring mother and virtuous wife are also accentuated by mainstream media to frame female athletes in feminine roles [3].

2) **Individualism and Collectivism:** Individualism and collectivism represent different attributes of the success in sports’ field. Individualists believe that internal force like personal dedication is the key in success, whereas collectivists demonstrate that success is achieved by external respects such team efforts or national support [37]. Unlike Western countries where individualism is a dominant ideology in sports, Asian countries generally pay much more attention to collectivism [38]. For instance, China typically has a collectivist culture where emphasized that teamwork and national strength are the keys for female athletes to triumph. When women athletes failed to match with media-expected image as a collectivist, their athletic achievement might be questioned by mainstream media [36].

3) **Nationalism:** Nationalism showcases how individual and collective factors generate identities together in a world no longer animated by corporate identities [39][40]. Sport has been acknowledged as the vehicle in defining national identities, generating belonging and promoting nationalism under globalization [41][42]. Portraying athletes as national heroes by mainstream media has therefore become an effective mechanism in the construction of nationalism [25]. Constructing nationalism through the representation of elite women athletes by mainstream media appeared to be more frequently in Asian countries than the West [17].

### 5. Methodology

#### 5.1 Research Strategy

Qualitative approach has been applied in this study to gain a thorough grasp of how Chinese mainstream media frames female athletes from certain social and cultural perspectives.

Qualitative analysis is the initial step in developing comprehension relating to phenomena and is a process unique to an individual by investigating the ways in which participant experiences and perceives [43]. Clear explanations of the materials under examination, their meanings, and the ways in which these messages are portrayed are key components of qualitative analysis [44].

Qualitative approach is substantially used to analyze media and individuals in sports. Giacobbi and Joy (1999) qualitatively examine televised media portrayals of Tiger Woods from a theoretical framework rooted in cultural studies tradition [45]. Beamon Krystal K (2010) qualitatively elaborates on the ubiquity of athletics in the socialization of African American male athletes [46]. Naraine and Milena (2017) qualitatively reflects on how social media may be implemented by their own national sports organizations [47].

#### 5.2 Research Design: Case Selection

Database will only be retrieved from China’s mainstream media. Relevant materials are abundant in China’s web portals as researchers found that national mainstream media typically give domestic athletes more attention [26]. Concentrating on China’s media guarantees the feasibility of data collection and the analysis of China’s perspectives on female athletes.

Li Na is chosen as the case study in this paper. Li Na is the first Asian tennis female athlete to win the Grand Slam champion, thus plays an influential and irreplaceable role in China’s women sports with incredible newsworthiness [27]. Nowadays, insofar there is no other China’s women athletes exceeding Li Na’s global impact yet, which makes Li Na the most appropriate and representative candidate.

#### 5.3 Method

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate mainstream media that focused on Li Na from 2014 to now. CDA conceptualizes discussion of interrelated social processes and explores the reproduction of political and economic structures in literary and visual forms [20]. This approach is frequently employed in media studies to highlight how text and discourse in social and political contexts are utilized to implement, develop, and oppose societal abuse,
dominance, and inequality [48]. The analysis must be critical by demonstrating how socioeconomic, gendered, and racial systems are constructed by the domination and subordination of individuals under certain social circumstances [49].

5.4 Data Collection

The mainstream media must meet the following criteria:

1) It includes well-managed propaganda in the popular press with excellent quality and significant national impact.

2) Being interconnected to or owned directly by the national government, it epitomizes the nation’s values.

3) It has a specialized channel where it broadcasts on sports stories that appeal to enormous sports audiences.

CCTV (https://sports.cctv.com) is selected following the aforementioned criteria. We searched the internet extensively for news articles about Li Na from 2013 until the present (2014 was the year Li Na retired). Key terms included “Li Na”, “tennis”, “emotion”, “Li Na’s husband”, “Li Na’s coach”, “wife”, “mom”, “international influence”, and “representation”. Documents are collected from online formats of CCTV coverage, yielding a total of 118 articles that meet the requirements.

Small numbers of samples are usually used in qualitative studies that facilitates in-depth analysis [44]. Once the saturation -- the point at which scholars have acquired a variety of views and aren’t obtaining anything new -- has been attained and no additional frames appeared, the researcher proceeded to the subsequent category. Consequently, 118 articles are retrieved relevant to key terms, only 10 articles that already reached the theoretical saturation point are coded.

5.5 Data Analysis

The retrieved data are categorized into three conceptual areas based on the theory of framing including a total of 8 specific themes. The three categories are feminine roles (themes=emotionality, infantilization, family roles), individualism and collectivism (rebel, contribution from men), nationalism (internationalization, national pride, role model in society), and these data are presented below in Table 1: Texts show how each theme is tagged by specific news reporting;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Tags</th>
<th>Meaningful unites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Roles</td>
<td>Emotionality</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>“Li Na shouts at audiences to 'shut up' when she felt being distracted by the noise from crowds during the match” (Note 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infantization</td>
<td>Criticism from coach</td>
<td>“Li Na is criticized by coach for being mentally immature as she is easily interfered by things outside tennis court” (Note 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family roles</td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>“Li Na complains her husband’s incompetency in raising the kids” (Note 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>“Li Na became more emotionally stable than ever since she got pregnant” (Note 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism and Collectivism</td>
<td>Rebel</td>
<td>Uncooperative attitude</td>
<td>“Li Na expressed her anger facing the interviewer’s question ‘do you want to apology to Chinese fans’ after her loss of the competition’” (Note 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contribution from men</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>“Li Na’s coach teaches her how to control the emotion” (Note 6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>“Li Na’s husband plays many roles in her tennis career: coach, ‘babysitter’, chef and therapist” (Note 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>Internationalization</td>
<td>Diplomatist</td>
<td>“Li Na is the ‘diplomatist’ of China in the globe” (Note 8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National identity</td>
<td>Prize</td>
<td>“Li Na became the first Asian tennis athlete inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame” (Note 9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role model in society</td>
<td>Charitarian</td>
<td>“Li Na participated charities and provided financial support for disable children” (Note 10).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Findings

6.1 Feminine roles

1) Emotionality--frustration: Li Na was criticized by mainstream media for readily getting frustrated during the match and furiously yelled at audiences (Note 1). Hardly ever did mainstream media mention that athletes need concentration during the intense competition. The negative noise from the crowds distracted Li Na, however, only Li Na was blamed for being too emotional rather than the audiences who lacked of respects to the athlete.

2) Infantization--criticism from coach: Criticism from Li Na’s coach was regularly emphasized by mainstream media throughout her tennis career (Note 2). Reasons of being criticized was Li Na both being too emotionally vulnerable confronting the setbacks and being easily distracted by non-tennis-related factors. Coach’s negative comments relatively exaggerated Li Na’s immaturity in lacking of independence and self-discipline.
3) Family roles—wife and mom: After Li Na’s retirement, her feminine roles as wife and mom were particularly reinforced by mainstream media (Note 3; Note4). The coverage reported Li Na’s complaint of husband’s incompetence in raising the children and her shifting personality from emotionality to stability, which manifested a image of a virtuous wife and a caring mother.

6.2 Individualism and Collectivism

1) Rebel—uncooperative attitude: Li Na was regularly criticized by mainstream media for her reluctance of apologizing after the loss of match and repudiation of representing China to compete (Note 5). Rarely did audiences recognized the sarcastic questions the interviewers asked following the match loss. Li Na’s anxiety was barely empathized but her disobedience were targeted, exaggerated and criticized by the media.

2) Contribution from men—coach and husband: The contribution from Li Na’s team— male coach and husband— was highly stressed by mainstream media in describing Li Na’s success (Note 6; Note 7). This emphasis underscored the necessities of men in an elite female athlete’s successful career, as well as reinforcing the concepts of collective efforts and marginalizing the image of individualist shaped by Li Na’s rebellion.

6.3 Nationalism

1) Internationalization—diplomatist: Li Na’s achievement in tennis made her an international celebrity who represented China as a “diplomatist” in the globe (Note 8). Unlike other typical Chinese female athletes, Li Na is more conversational and humorous. Her capacity of being straightforward is built upon her extraordinary success in tennis, and therefore her embracement of internationalization made her a cosmopolitan Chinese citizen.

2) National identity—national pride: Li Na undeniably glorified her nation as the first Asian tennis athlete being inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame (Note 9). This is an unparalleled historical breakthrough in both men’s and women’s sports. Li Na’s success has a momentous impact for China’s global influence, which enhanced national pride, inspired the women fellows, and encouraged the next Chinese generations.

3) Role model in society—charitarian: Li Na frequently participated in charities that made her a role model in China’s society (Note10). Mainstream media particularly reinforced Li Na’s new identity -- charitarian -- and her amiable attitudes after retirement. As Li Na’s character has been reshaped that conforms to the conventional feminine role, bringing her image back to the “orthodoxy” in socially more acceptable way.

7. Discussion

Three common patterns observed from above findings are used by CCTV to frame Li Na’s social image.

1) Mainstream media emphasized Li Na’s stereotypical feminine roles: CCTV’s reporting content of Li Na from gender perspective in this study relatively reinforced her conventional non-athlete women roles and therefore undermined her athletic achievement. This finding correspond with previous researches that China’s mainstream media tend to under-represent elite female athletes by stressing either stereotypical feminine traits such as emotional vulnerability and lack of independence, or traditional domestic roles such as a wife romantically in love or a caring mother [3][23].

2) Mainstream media maintained collective efforts: An ideological conflict is discovered between individualism and collectivism in media coverage of Li Na. CCTV denounced Li Na’s rebellious attitude as well as complimenting the teamwork that led her to success [24]. Researchers have discussed that since Li Na’s repudiation in representing the nation labeled herself as a “rebel” and “individualist”, China’s mainstream media had to emphasize the firm supports from male partners to reconstruct Li Na as an ideal female “collectivist” with “subservience, self-abasement and industry” [22][27].

3) Mainstream media “corrected” Li Na’s controversial image: The perpetuation of trivializing Li Na is also reflected by the way mainstream media purposely corrected Li Na’s controversial image and reconstructed her national identity [28]. Li Na has been reported a closer relationship with homeland through her increasing global awards and attendances in activities as representative of China. Li Na’s new image has made her as an inspiring social role model in a socially acceptable way, whereas her previous rebellious character has been gradually forgotten by the public [27].

Moreover, there are two distinctions between Western and China’s researches in media’s portrayals of elite female athletes. First, Chinese female athletes were not depicted under the Western stereotypes of women [22]. Western perspective highlighted sexual attractiveness, whereas China’s mainstream media stressed traditional domestic roles. Although Li Na’s appearance has been discussed by other China’s popular web portals like Soho and Sina (Note 11; Note 12), the absence of sexualization in CCTV explains a particular Chinese culture and significant roles female athletes play in the national identity construction [28]. Second, race-related discourses is a commonplace in the West, whereas nationalism-related conversation is the most concerned issue in China. Varying cultural backgrounds are the primary factors. Most Western countries had immigration history and thus have racial diversity in modern society, whereas China is a homogenous country where national benefit is the foremost. Due to the demographic factors, race is an issue barely interested Chinese society or triggered public discourse.

8. Conclusion

This study has applied Li Na as the case study to analyze how the elite female athletes are framed by China’s mainstream media. Through the emphasizing on stereotypical gendered roles, collective significance and
national identity, Li Na’s athletic achievement is to some extend trivialized by mainstream media’s portrayals. Combining with the existing studies both from China’s and Western perspectives, this study presents findings that both support and complement the previous researches.

Although this article is analyzed based on previous literature review, there are multiple theoretical contributions:

1) Presenting a specific analysis of one high-profile China’s female athlete as the relevant case studies are very few in China’s academics;
2) Complementing academics of gender studies from China’s perspectives;
3) Supporting the findings of relevant China’s studies by analyzing the updated media reporting.

The in-depth connections between China and other Asian countries are lacking in this study. Even though Naomi Osaka as a Japanese athletes is mentioned, she is not representative for traditional Asian cultures. To analyze how female athletes are framed in the scope of Asia, the complicated values among Asian countries including gender, patriarchy, nationalism, individualism, ethnography, politics, history and convention that need to be further discussed.

Sexuality as an essential term in analysis of female athletes is missing, for which is not touched upon by the mainstream media this study focuses on. China’s traditional culture decides that the sexuality of public celebrities, especially of female athletes who are national representatives, is an avoiding topic in public conversation. Yet, the sexuality-related discussions have been increasing on China’s social media nowadays, which generates online conflicts between open-minded and conservative conceptions regarding to women’s sexuality. This conflict especially was originated by elite female athletes in China, which may be a subject for future research.

References

10. Frisby, Cynthia M. "A content analysis of Serena Williams and Angelique Kerber’s racial and sexist microaggressions." Open Journal of Social Sciences 5.05 (2017): 263.


