Social Media Framing of Athletes by Media Networks and the Public during the 2022 Winter Olympics

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Abstract: This research proposal aims to investigate the factors influencing the perception of Olympic athletes, with a specific focus on Beverly Zhu and Eileen Gu during the 2022 Winter Olympics. The study will explore how media networks frame the images and crises of these athletes on social media, as well as the impact of this framing on the general public's perceptions. By conducting a content analysis of social media posts from both sports media networks and the public, the study aims to identify patterns and correlations between media coverage and public responses. The analysis will examine the tone, content, and framing tactics used in the posts to understand how athlete images are constructed and perceived. The findings of this study will contribute to the fields of sports media and society by shedding light on the current-day influences of sports media companies on public perceptions and the framing tactics employed to shape these perceptions.

1. Introduction

The Winter Olympics is a highly anticipated international sporting event that brings together athletes from all around the globe[1]. It provides a platform for athletes to showcase their skills and compete at the highest level, making it an ideal opportunity for countries to display their sporting prowess and enhance their image on the global stage. Social media has become a primary tool by which the public can participate in sports games while framing their perceptions of athlete performance and sports programs [2]. Despite research suggesting that the public often distrusts Olympic bodies and sports federations, sports media through social channels becomes a trusted avenue to frame public perceptions.

Beverly Zhu, an American-born Chinese figure skater, represented China at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China [3]. Her performance generated considerable media attention, especially among the Chinese audience, who followed her progress closely. As a figure skater of Chinese descent, Zhu was expected to perform well and positively represent China. In 2022, Zhu's selection to the Chinese Olympic team over her counterparts drew significant criticism from fans and onlookers who took to social media to express their significant dissent, especially toward her performance at the games[4].

Eileen Gu, an American-born freestyle skier, rose to excellence during the 2022 Winter Olympics as she collected gold medals for her performance [5]. Similar to Zhu, she renounced her American

citizenship to play for China. Her performance dubbed her the "pride of China" as she went on to win more medals than any other athlete representing China at the Olympic event. On the other hand, some viewers engaged in heated debates questioning her loyalty and citizenship, given the switch in her representation [6]. There is still more to understand on any possible relationship between media networks and the general public's portrayals of athletes such as Zhu and Gu based on their performance and crises.

This research proposal seeks to fill the gap in research by analyzing what factors influence the perception of Olympic athletes, specifically Zhu and Gu. The study will also explore the possible influences of media networks on the general public's perceptions. Specifically, it will examine alignments between how sports media leverages social media platforms to portray the issues surrounding Zhu and Ghu and how the public presented their thoughts and views. The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to the fields of sports media and society.

By examining the factors impacting Olympic athlete image on social media and the correlation between news networks and the general public, this study may provide insights into the current-day influences that sports media companies have on the public and what framing tactics may be leveraged to do so. It will zero into the extent to which the public may leverage outside influences to inform the conclusions they draw on sports athletes and their performance.

2. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on three main areas: framing in sports media, image building in sports, and crisis management. Framing is a means by which various elements can be used to influence how stories are presented and perceived by their audience [7]. Research suggests that framing is vital in simplifying content complexity to make it more understandable for its audience. Additionally, traditional media appears to leverage social media to mediate agenda-setting that informs what and how audiences consider relating to different news stories [8]. In fact, for the Olympic games, social media has increasingly been leveraged to present information to fans across the globe on their sports events and Olympic athletes [9]. This becomes imperative in understanding how sports news leverages social media to influence perceptions of athletes and their performance.

2.1 Athlete Image Building through Framing

Previous studies have shown that image building is crucial in sports, as athletes' images can impact their marketability, sponsorship opportunities, and overall reputation. Image building is a crucial sports aspect that has received considerable attention in the literature. Previous studies have shown that an athlete's image can significantly impact their marketability, sponsorship opportunities, and overall reputation [10]. The concept of brand management for athletes has grown in popularity owing to the fact that athletes with a positive image are more likely to attract endorsements and support from fans, while those with a negative image may struggle to secure lucrative deals [11]. Athlete branding is generally understood as a strategy to establish a trademark that the public can exclusively associate with an ethnicity [12].

Previous branding studies have documented positive consequences of successful branding, such as influencing the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay a premium price, marketing communication effectiveness, and promotion of positive word of mouth. In addition, the athlete's established brand value will aid his or her post-athletic career since well-branded athletes may capitalize on their brand value throughout their careers [13]. Rein et al. (2006) found that one benefit of seeing athletes as brands are that "the athlete has the potential to enter into a variety of sectors and use his or her sports career as a platform for other endeavors."

When looking at image building from a sports media perspective, framing becomes a key

component in how the image of an athlete is shaped and later perceived by the general public. Even if athletes may want to create a persona separate from their career, the media plays a significant part in presenting that image to the public, either positively or negatively [14].

2.2 Crisis Management through Framing

Studies have also shown that crisis management is essential in sports, as athletes are constantly under public scrutiny, and any adverse event can damage their image and reputation (Filo et al., 2019). Crisis management is another crucial aspect of sports since athletes are constantly under public scrutiny, and any negative event can damage their image and reputation. According to crisis management expert Steven Fink, a crisis can be defined as a period of instability in which a significant change is impending, and it could result in either highly positive or highly negative outcomes [15]. Some experts in the field suggest that crises offer opportunities for organizations to persevere and grow rather than just presenting the risk of failure.

As stipulated by Curtin et al. (2005), there are three main classifications of crises: those that occur naturally, those that are created, and those that arise from accidents. The scholars also argue that in order to qualify as a full-blown crisis, a situation must be escalating in intensity, attracting scrutiny from the media and government, interfering with regular business operations, damaging the company's reputation, and affecting the bottom line. Crises in sports can range from accidents to scandals and threaten public safety, reputation, and financial losses [16]. The rise of instant communication through online platforms has changed this, and immediate response is now necessary (Caywood & Stocker, 1997). Media networks, therefore, play a pivotal role in portraying these types of crises to the public to influence their perceptions.

Based on the understanding that framing plays on athlete image building and crisis management, there is more to be known about what factors influence how athlete images and crises are framed through social media channels. This all comes into play in either building or tarnishing an athlete's brand, especially for Zhu and Gu in the Winter Olympics. This, therefore, brings about Research Question One (RQ1) and Research Question Two (RQ2) for the study:

RQ1: What factors impact media networks' framing of athletes' images and crises on social media during the 2022 Winter Olympics?

RQ2: What factors impact the general public's framing of athletes' images and crises on social media during the 2022 Winter Olympics?

Reviewing the previously examined literature, there is also more to be known about the relationship between sports media framing tactics through social media and the public's perception. Current literature focuses on athlete coverage by the media, separate from the public's portrayal of similar events. This will also bring into discussion if there is any relationship between the two or if one influences the other. Research Question Three (RQ3) and Research Question Four (RQ4), therefore, are as follows:

RQ3: What influence did media framing tactics through social media have on the public's response to athlete images in the 2022 Winter Olympics?

RQ4: What influence did media framing tactics through social media have on the public's response to athlete crises in the 2022 Winter Olympics?

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

The research design of this study will be a content analysis of social media coverage of athletes during the Winter Olympics by news networks and the general public[17]. The analysis will primarily

focus on content surrounding Beverly Zhu and Eileen Gu while incorporating posts regarding other athletes who performed during the 2022 Winter Olympic events. It will further focus on the tone and content of the social media posts, specifically emphasizing how their image is constructed on social media[18].

3.2 Time Frame

The data collection for this study will cover the period from the start of the Winter Olympics until one month after the conclusion of the games. This will allow for an examination of the immediate media response to Zhu and Gu's performance and any subsequent coverage that may have emerged.

3.3 Sample

The sample for this study will consist of 140 social media posts from sports media networks covering the 2022 Winter Olympics. The sample of posts will be posted between January 4 and March 20, 2022. This will ensure that any feedback or sentiments expressed after the Olympic games have been completed can also be captured. The sample will be drawn from social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Hashtags and keyword searches using words including "2022 Winter Olympics", "Beverly Zhu," and "Eileen Gu" will be leveraged to source the posts. The content will also be filtered to cover the previously specified time period. This hashtag search and date filtering strategy is part of the purposive sampling approach to ensure that the posts meet a particular criterion to be included in the data analysis[19].

3.4 Variables

The variables that will be examined in this study include the means by which media presents information versus the means by which fans express their opinions. The researcher will explore any patterns in the data regarding whether perceptions of fans mirror the analysis and reports of the sports networks on social media. These variables will also lend insight as to whether news networks and the general public leverage the same approaches in presenting the information in their posts. Social media posts will be coded based on the different factors covered related to the athlete, including performance, citizenship, and crisis. The study will explore any potential links between the media's coverage versus public perceptions expressed on social media.

Overall, this methodology aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which athlete images are being constructed by media networks, with a particular focus on any potential implications for sports media and society[20].

4. Analysis of Results

For this study, a combination of 140 social media posts from the public and media sources surrounding the Beijing 2022 Olympics were selected and examined. The social media posts were purposefully sampled to cover the stories of Beverly Zhu, Eileen Gu, and other athletes and events. Both Zhu and Gu renounced their American citizenship to compete for the Chinese Olympic teams. Of the sampled posts, 46 came from the general public, while 34 came from media sources. Fifty-four posts were sampled from Twitter, leaving ten from Facebook and 16 from Instagram. As previously mentioned, hashtags related to the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 were sourced within the month and a week from January 4 to March 20.

Throughout the analysis, codes were assigned to each post based on the approach used to portray the athlete's image or performance. The codes were then organized in a table based on the primary,

secondary, and tertiary source types. Based on the code tiers, a thematic analysis found several themes derived from the data. These codified breakdowns are listed in Appendix A. From the posts coming from the media, the recurring themes identified were (1) Nationalism, (2) Performance, (3) Social Response, and (4) Crisis. Regarding the first theme, most media sources mentioned that both players were American-born athletes who were now competing for China. This occurrence occurred more for Beverly, for whom media platforms leveraged to discuss her performance and the social response to her performance. Given that Zhu experienced mishaps during her performance, which resulted in harsh criticism from fans on Weibo, social media highlights appeared to focus more on the social response due to the switch in her citizenship. Some media sources appeared to use keywords expressing positive support or negative criticism toward the athlete. On a positive aspect, some media sources used the terms "abuse," "attacked," and "mistake" as a display of positive support for Zhu. Oppositely, others used the phrases "traitor" and "gave up American citizenship," which appeared to come with a negative tone of criticism toward the athlete.

For Gu, similarly, most media platforms highlighted nationalism as part of the narrative they painted regarding the athlete's performance. Oppositely, however, was more of a focus on her exceptional performance and, in some cases, her personality and interests. For Gu, fewer posts mentioned any criticism or backlash received by the public regarding the switch in her citizenship. Three posts by media platforms did not mention nationalism, as they focused solely on the outcome of her performance at the Winter Olympics. The mention of Gu's citizenship in the other analyzed posts described her as "Chinese American" with less emphasis on her renouncing her American citizenship to play for China. Only one post in the sample regarding Gu highlighted the social response to her, which was attributed to a personal statement she made unrelated to the 2022 Winter Olympics.

For other athletes, their citizenship appeared to be mentioned more in the presence of superior performance or when social issues were present in the country. In a few cases, citizenship was also mentioned when athletes were involved in a crisis related to breaking ethics codes, being attacked by spectators, or betraying their loyalty to their country.

For social media posts by the public, three overarching themes were identified, including the following, (1) Nationalism, (2) Social Response, (3) Performance, and (4) Bias & Discrimination. Nine of the posts directly highlighted Zhu and Gu's nationalities and country of birth, while a couple of the other posts under examination made references to the social responses to their citizenship. Some of the posts in the sample leveraged the athlete's citizenship to call out the negative social response and bias and discrimination related to the social response to the athletes.

For posts related to Beverly Zhu, supportive feedback appeared to condemn hateful comments toward her as a result of her performance. Some of the posts emphasized the difficulties that athletes must go through to make it to the Olympics as a way to offer positive support despite her performance. A handful of the posts in the sample called out the bias and discrimination against Asian women compared to other athletes that also changed their nationalities to compete for other countries with no pushback. For those posts offering negative feedback, Zhu's poor performance appeared to be credited to her renouncing her American membership. Some posts appeared to suggest that her renouncing her American citizenship was the trigger for her poor performance. One post also justified the backlash, given her having renounced her citizenship.

The posts related to Gu appeared to be more positive and highlighted her exceptional performance. Her decision to renounce her citizenship was not highlighted as much as the gold medals she took home due to her performance. Some posts addressed the social response to her nationalism but justified her decision out of support.

For other posts by the public, there seemed to be a simple mention of performance or issues related to the athlete as a way of presenting the information. In some cases, posts by the public were also

accompanied by a display of support or criticism or a statement regarding the level of bias toward the athlete. This is demonstrated in the progression of the secondary and tertiary codes.

The thematic analysis found two common themes between what media networks and the general public shared. The other two themes identified were unique to each other.

5. Conclusion

The coding and analysis of the social media posts did not show a specific correlation or cause-and-effect relationship between the media and the public. Media posts through social channels focused on the athlete's citizenship, social responses, performance, and personal life in the context of their post. The latter three themes are often informed by the former. Therefore, to respond to RQ1, the factors impacting media networks' framing of athletes' images and crises on social media during the 2022 Winter Olympics were (1) Nationalism, (2) Performance, (3) Social Response, and (4) Crisis. In response to RQ2, the factors impacting how the general public used framing for 2022 Winter Olympic Athletes are (1) Nationalism, (2) Social Response, (3) Performance, and (4) Discrimination. For RQ3 and RQ4, it did not appear that posts from the general public appeared to reference posts from media networks. It does not appear that they carried the narratives from the media, but rather, they responded to them. In the same sense, given the response to athlete performance, news media platform framing was an outcome of what was shared by the public.

It is interesting to note that there were similarities in how both platforms framed their stories. It appears that Zhu Yi, her decision to change her citizenship was mentioned more, which made it appear that her poor performance was based on her decision. While Gu made a similar decision, both media and public social media posts appeared to praise her performance and touch on other topics, such as her personality, instead of focusing too much on her citizenship. Therefore, there appear to be aligned patterns in how the news and the public frame their stories regarding athlete images and crises.

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