

# ***Exploring the High-Income Phenomenon of Professional Tennis Athletes from the Perspective of Media Sociology: A Case Study of Professional Female Tennis Players***

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**Abstract:** The technological advancements has expanded the spread of the media, while the global economic growth has prompted greater emphasis on industrial balance and the development of tertiary industries. This paper analyzes the high-income phenomenon of professional tennis athletes, revealing the crucial role of media in promoting the development of sports industry and enhancing the commercial value of athletes from the perspective of media sociology. Taking professional female tennis players as an example, this study explores the relationship between new media and the development of tennis competitions, as well as how media shapes athletes' images and boosts their commercial value. The research finds that media not only serves as a bridge for information transmission but also a significant force in shaping public perception and driving market trends. The rise of new media has provided more diversified channels and opportunities for the promotion of tennis tournaments and the exploitation of athletes' commercial value. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the immense role of media in the development of tertiary industries exemplified by the sports industry.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Case Introduction**

With the rapid technological advancements and accelerated globalization, the media industry has undergone unprecedented transformations, which is increasingly influencing the development of the global sports industry. Media serves not only as a bridge for information transmission but also as a crucial force in shaping public perception and influencing market trends. Against this backdrop, the commercial value of the sports industry has been significantly elevated, resulting in a surge in the income levels of top professional athletes. In May 2023, *Forbes* released its list of the highest-earning female athletes of 2023, Except for Gu Ailing, the top 10 athletes in the list are all tennis players, which reflects the high professionalism and commercialization of women's tennis, and also proves the high influence of female tennis players in the world.

This paper aims to delve into the reasons behind the high incomes of professional female tennis players from the perspective of media sociology and explore the relationship between new media and

the development of tennis competitions. We will analyze how media shapes the images of female tennis players, enhances their commercial value, and discuss the significant role of new media in expanding the influence of tennis and promoting its commercialization. By fully utilizing the disciplinary thinking and relevant theories of media sociology, this paper conducts an in-depth exploration and analysis of this case to demonstrate the tremendous role of media in the development of sports industry, thereby elucidating the significant function of mass media in the development of tertiary industries in modern society.

## 1.2. Research Background and Literature Review

In recent years, with the continuous growth of the global economy and the continuous improvement of people's living standards, the sports industry has gradually become an important driving force for economic development. As an integral part of the global sports industry, tennis, with its unique charm, has attracted the attention of numerous enthusiasts and spectators worldwide. With the deepening of media research, the close relationship between sports and media has been paid more and more attention by scholars, and sports media research has begun to enter the field of view of the academic circle (Shang Ximeng, 2021)<sup>[4]</sup>. With the continuous advancements in media technology and the rise of new media, the scope and influence of tennis have been significantly enhanced, bringing more business opportunities and income sources to tennis players.

The development of women's tennis has evolved from its inception to prosperity. With the popularization of tennis and the improvement of women's tennis players' competitive levels, more women have begun participating in tennis, and a batch of outstanding players have emerged. At the same time, extensive media coverage and promotion of women's tennis tournaments have further excavated and enhanced the commercial value of women's tennis. Female tennis players, with their remarkable athletic skills, unique personal charm, and extensive fan base, have won the favor of numerous sponsors, achieving a leap in income. New media has also provided more diversified channels and methods for the promotion and dissemination of tennis tournaments, enabling them to cover wider geographical areas and audiences. In addition, new media offers more business opportunities and promotional channels for sponsors, further enhancing the commercial value of tennis.

Numerous scholars have conducted sociological inquiries into the development of tennis competitions from various perspectives. "The Development Trend of Tennis Competitions from a Sociological Perspective" discusses the influence of politics on tennis competitions and their reciprocal effects. It elaborates on the formation and development of tennis as an elite culture in China. In recent years, adhering to the advocacy of satisfying the people's ever-growing needs for a better life, the state has vigorously developed the sports industry and emphasized mass sports. Mass media has played a significant role in the democratization of tennis, once considered an aristocratic sport. The facts reported by mass media are often filtered, selected, and constructed. In a sense, middle-class culture is also a product of media persuasion, and the popularity of tennis is a manifestation of media's persuasive role in sports (Wang Qifeng, 2011)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Within the field of sociology, previous studies have paid more attention to explore the role of media in popularizing tennis and the relationship between tennis and national political and economic development. However, the exploration from the perspective of media sociology, there are few researches that integrate the relevant logic of economics, especially on the research of the relationship between the income of professional female tennis players and the transformation of media, there are few relevant academic literatures. In summary, the high income of female tennis players is the result of a combination of multiple factors. From the perspective of media sociology, we can gain a deeper understanding of the reasons and mechanisms behind this phenomenon. Meanwhile, the rise of new

media has brought new opportunities and challenges to the development of tennis competitions. Therefore, this paper will integrate relevant literature and theoretical frameworks to delve into the causes of high-income professional female tennis players, and the relationship between new media and the development of tennis competitions.

## 2. Theoretical Explanation

### 2.1. Theoretical Basis

#### 2.1.1. Media Theory

McLuhan, in his seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* which is published in 1964, pioneered the perspective of observing human social development from the angle of media technology. He emphasized the socio-historical role of media technology. In the book, he argued that media possesses the nature of organisms and is thus an extension of the human body. He proposed that "all technologies are extensions of the human body and nervous system's power and speed," and hence, "all media are extensions of our bodies into the public realm." Specifically, the central nervous system's extension is television, while the internet expands the radius of human life.

Furthermore, McLuhan coined the term "global village". He believed that the communication revolution changed people's sensory scales, compressed vast distances through electronic media's high-speed transmission, and eliminated boundaries in human vision and hearing, gradually making the world a small village.

In the phenomenon of high income among female tennis players, the influence of media is crucial. Traditional and emerging media have promoted women's tennis events to wider audiences through live broadcasts, positive reports, event promotions, and player interviews, successfully shaping athletes' "star" images, enhancing their exposure and popularity, and attracting sponsors and advertisers, thereby boosting their commercial value and income.

#### 2.1.2. Brand Effect Theory

This theory refers to the economic utility brought about by intangible assets, such as brands, for their owners or managers.

This study employs this theory to explore how sponsors utilize tennis players' personal brand effects for direct sponsorships, thereby increasing athletes' off-court income. The theory emphasizes the importance of brands in market competition. Top female tennis players often establish personal brands by participating in tournaments, signing sponsors, and launching personal products, thereby enhancing their commercial value and income.

#### 2.1.3. Use and Satisfaction Theory

In 1974, E. Katz first put forward the theory in his book *Personal Use of Mass Communication*: people's media contact behavior is a causal chain process of "social factor + psychological factor — media expectation — media contact — demand satisfaction", thus putting forward the basic model of the process of "use and satisfaction". Process: (1) The purpose of people's contact and use of media is to meet their own needs, which is related to social factors and personal psychological factors; (2) Two conditions for people to contact and use the media: first, the possibility of contact with the media; Second, media impression; (3) The audience chooses the specific media and content and starts to use it, and there are two kinds of results: satisfied and unsatisfied; (4) Whether they are satisfied or not will affect their media choice and use behavior in the future. People modify their existing media impressions according to the satisfaction results and change their expectations for the media to

varying degrees.

This study mainly uses this theory to explore how the mass media meet the needs of the audience, and at the same time, through meeting the needs of the audience, to achieve the dissemination of tennis events, professional women's tennis players and other related content, so as to improve the entire process of commercial value.

## 2.2. Analytical Framework

From the perspective of media sociology (Fig 1), this paper analyzes the three main types of entities in the media industry system: advertisers (enterprises, brands, institutions), service providers (various traditional and emerging media), and audiences (internet users, media consumers).

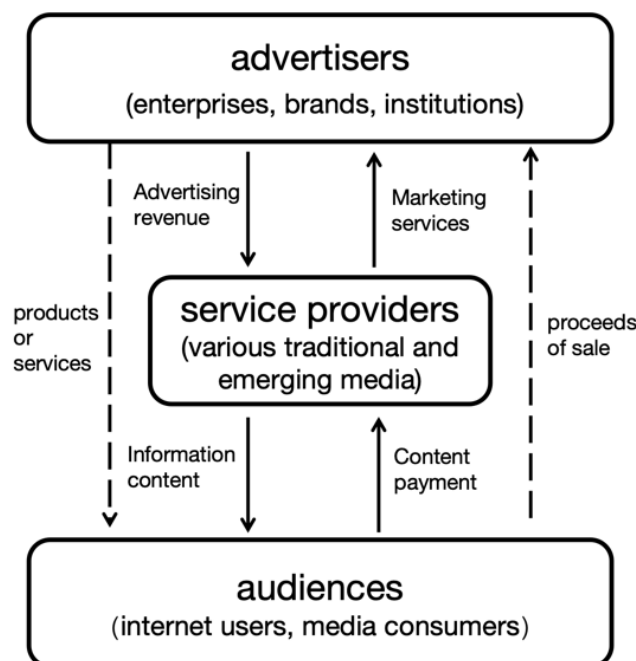


Fig. 1 Media industry system

The media industry is an attention-based industry centered on information services. Media organizations do not rely solely on selling their products for all returns. An essential economic return for media organizations comes from "secondary selling," whereby the attention concentrated on their content or broadcast times is "sold" to advertisers or any parties interested in these audiences. Based on this, we argue that the attention attracted by media is the source of media's economic value. As an "attention industry," the market value of the media industry is closely related to its effectiveness in attracting audiences' attention, emphasizing the "audience-oriented" approach. The market value of the media industry is closely linked to three factors: audience engagement, attention retention, and effective audience selection.

The third part of this paper will be based on this logical framework, focusing on how the world's top professional female tennis players' images, shaped by the media, enhance the engagement of audiences, primarily consisting of athlete fans and tournament spectators, and maintain their attention for extended periods, effectively achieving sponsors' profitability goals.

### 3. Analysis of the Reasons for High Incomes among Professional Female Tennis Players from the Perspective of Media Sociology

#### 3.1. Analyzing the Income Composition of Tennis Players

##### 3.1.1. Income Composition of Tennis Players

Professional athletes' income comprises on-court and off-court components:

On-court income primarily includes tournament prizes. The popularity of the media for tennis has attracted tournament sponsors to sponsor tennis events, and spectators pay to watch tennis matches online or offline, contributing to athletes' prize money.

Off-court income comes mainly from direct sponsorship of players by sponsors, who use the popularity of tennis players to generate branding for their businesses and brands. Some athletes will partner with apparel brands to launch their own clothing lines, or with sports equipment brands to launch signature collections, thereby increasing their revenue streams. For examples, Nike's Li Na series and Naomi Osaka series.

In 2023, the top 20 highest-paid female athletes will collectively earn an estimated \$226 million. The top 20 are as follows (US \$) Table 1:

Table 2: The World's Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2023

Ranking	Name	Sports	Age	Income (unit=1million)			
				Total Income	On-field	Off-field	Off-field Proportion
1	Iga Swiatek	Tennis	23	\$23.9	\$9.9	\$14	58.6%
2	Eileen Gu	Freestyle Skiing	21	\$22.1	\$0.1	\$20	90.5%
3	Coco Gauff	Tennis	20	\$21.7	\$6.7	\$15	69.1%
4	Emma Raducanu	Tennis	21	\$15.2	\$0.2	\$15	98.7%
5	Naomi Osaka	Tennis	27	\$15	0	\$15	100%
6	Aryna Sabalenka	Tennis	26	\$14.7	\$8.2	\$6.5	44.2%
7	Jessica Pegula	Tennis	30	\$12.5	\$6	\$6.5	52%
8	Venus Williams	Tennis	44	\$12.2	\$0.2	\$12	98.3%
9	Elena Rybakina	Tennis	25	\$9.5	\$5.5	\$4	42.1%
10	Leylah Fernandez	Tennis	23	\$8.8	\$1.8	\$7	79.5%
11	Nelly Korda	Golf	26	\$8.2	\$1.7	\$6.5	79.3%
11	Megan Rapinoe	Soccer	39	\$8.2	\$0.7	\$7.5	91.5%
13	Candace Parker	Basketball	38	\$8.1	\$0.1	\$8	98.8%
14	Alex Morgan	Soccer	35	\$7.8	\$0.8	\$7	89.7%
15	Qinwen Zheng	Tennis	21	\$7.2	\$1.7	\$5.5	76.4%
16	Simone Biles	Gymnastics	27	\$7.1	\$0.1	\$7	98.6%
16	Sindhu	Badminton	29	\$7.1	\$0.1	\$7	98.6%
18	Ons Jabeur	Tennis	30	\$5.7	\$3.2	\$2.5	43.9%
19	Brooke Henderson	Golf	26	\$5.4	\$1.9	\$3.5	64.8%
20	Vondrousova	Tennis	25	\$5.2	\$4.7	\$0.5	9.6%
Average		Tennis Players		\$12.63	\$4.00	\$8.63	64.4%
		All female athletes		\$11.28	\$2.68	\$8.5	74.2%

By comparing the prize money across sports, it is evident that tennis tournaments offer significantly higher prize pools than most other sports except golf. The sponsors of tennis events are predominantly renowned brands from various industries, including finance, luxury cars, premium alcohol, luxury goods, high-end cuisine, and renowned apparel brands, contributing to substantial sponsorship funding.

The proportion of off-field income proved that, except for Jabeur and Vondrousova, the majority of

professional female tennis players in the list derive a larger portion of their income from off-court sources, underscoring the influence of media-generated celebrity effects on sponsorships. In addition, the prize income of top professional tennis also has a greater degree of correlation with nationality, such as the fourth ranked in this table, Raducanu, is British, while Venus Williams is American. Big countries with higher international status have a more complete industrial system and media system, and have a greater voice in the international scope.

### **3.1.2. Contributions of Traditional and New Media to Tennis Promotion and Income:**

Traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers provide significant promotion platforms for tennis through their extensive reach and influence. For example, the regular broadcasts of Grand Slam tournaments and finals on major television networks attract large audiences. A study of the mediatization of the tournament at Wimbledon from a spectator's perspective (Kennedy et al., 2017) noted the mediatization of the championship at the All England Club in various places, including extensive advertising and sponsoring, multiscreen viewing, and the introduction of the Hawk-Eye—the Wimbledon experience, either live or mediated—is an experience of mediatization (L Küpper, G Kossing, T Birkner, 2022)<sup>[1]</sup>. The media spread of tennis enhances the popularity and influence of tennis events while providing more exposure and advertising opportunities for players. Interviews, reports, and feature programs showcase athletes' daily lives, training, and competition, fostering deeper connections with viewers and elevating players' fame and commercial value.

New media, characterized by real-time interaction and rapid dissemination, offers more convenient and efficient means of promoting tennis. Social media and live streaming platforms enable audiences to follow matches, express opinions, and engage in interactions, fostering a stronger sense of participation and interest in tennis. Athletes can also interact with fans through these platforms, strengthening personal brands and fan bases, further enhancing their commercial value and income. Many tennis players have their own social media accounts, before the 2015 US Open Tennis Championship, Twitter promoted a public listing that featured the Twitter handles of 180 athletes competing in the prestigious event (Twitter 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>. By sharing training videos and daily life content, athletes increase fan loyalty and attract more sponsors and business opportunities.

## **3.2. Analyzing the Uniqueness of Tennis from a Media Sociological Perspective**

### **3.2.1. Uniqueness of Tennis Tournaments**

With both aesthetic viewing value and competitive characteristics, combined with the characteristics of media reporting and communication, there is no doubt that TV has promoted tennis to become the most popular sport after football. However, fans often overlook the significant control and influence media networks exert over the presented tennis matches, as these networks invest heavily in tennis and anticipate substantial returns (Fang Fangzhi, 2001)<sup>[5]</sup>. Given the economic and commercial implications of sports, the media value of players is considered a major asset in the area of professional sports businesses (P Garcia-del-Barrio and F Pujol, 2015)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Advertisers' choices are influenced by athletes' fame, image, achievements, and social media influence. Different advertisers may have diverse objectives, ranging from product exposure and sales growth to brand image enhancement. Some advertisers form long-term partnerships with female tennis players through sponsorship contracts, fostering mutual growth and development. Athletes and their teams invest resources in media cooperation and interactions to ensure positive image promotion and brand value enhancement. With the rise of digital media, female tennis players have more opportunities for self-expression and brand building, strengthening their personal brands and commercial value through social media interactions.



### 3.2.2. Uniqueness of Tennis Audience

Tennis attracts a highly affluent and engaged audience with strong purchasing power. The audiences include spectators at live events, TV viewers, and fans engaging through online and new media platforms. It is important to note that the classification of the audience here is an "ideal type" (Weber), not a general classification. The characteristics and needs of the audience have a direct impact on the commercial value of female tennis players. Athletes need to attract and maintain the audience's attention and support through their performance on the field, social media interaction and public activities, so as to enhance their business value and income level. Feedback and participation from the audience also influence advertisers' and sponsors' decisions, necessitating athletes' continuous engagement with their audiences to build a strong fan base and brand loyalty.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the high income of professional female tennis players is not a mere coincidence but the result of multiple factors working in concert. The extensive coverage and insightful analysis by traditional and new media have not only elevated the popularity and influence of tennis tournaments but also paved the way for athletes to secure more business opportunities and income sources. Furthermore, the rise of new media has injected fresh vitality into the development of tennis competitions, making the sport even more ingrained in people's hearts. With the continuous advancement of technology and the evolving media landscape, we have reason to believe that the brand effects generated by tennis players will continue to maintain their strong appeal and influence on audiences. Professional female tennis players will not only achieve more career successes but also earn higher incomes, showcasing the power of female athletes through social media and contributing significantly to gender equality worldwide. Simultaneously, we should also acknowledge the critical role of new media in promoting and developing tennis. Further exploration into how to leverage new media strategies to propel tennis forward is imperative.

Moreover, there are still some limitations in this paper. Firstly, we reflect deeply on potential biases and subjectivity in the research process. Methodologically, this paper relies primarily on a theoretical framework combined with specific case studies, lacking sufficient statistical analysis and empirical data support. Future research could delve deeper by incorporating more cases and detailed data, such as the specific data of an event. Secondly, while this paper broadly outlines the relationship between new media and tennis competition development, we fail to delve into specific marketing strategies and audience behavior analysis. Lastly, the ethical issues of media and the developing sports industry, such as athlete privacy protection and over-commercialization of media, are not addressed in this paper, which merit further exploration in future research endeavors.

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