

The Causes, Impacts, and Countermeasures of Event-Based Cyber Violence against Chinese Female Athletes

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Keywords: Cyber Violence, Chinese Female Athletes, Incidental Cyber Violence, Gender Bias, Coping Strategies

Abstract: Cyber violence, fueled by social media, is a growing global issue with widespread consequences on mental health, career success, and public perception. Chinese women athletes are disproportionately vulnerable, often targeted after controversial public events due to gender stereotyping, media sensationalism, and socio-cultural factors. However, research on its causes, effects, and solutions remains limited. This research examines cyber violence against women athletes in China through qualitative case studies of figures like Gu Ailing, and explores the causes, forms, and consequences of online abuse. The study highlights links between cyberbullying and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. It also reveals the negative impact on athletic performance and sponsorship opportunities. Additionally, it reinforces gender biases and fosters a toxic online environment, harming the broader sports culture. While solutions such as legislation, media campaigns, and counselling exist, enforcement challenges weaken their effectiveness. This study advocates for stronger legal protections, stricter social media regulations, enhanced support from sports associations, and public campaigns promoting safer online behavior. By systematically addressing cyber violence against female athletes, this research contributes to gender equality discourse and media ethics in sports while offering practical solutions for a more respectful and safer online space.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, cyber violence has become a global issue, posing serious threats to mental health and social stability. Social media has amplified online harassment, making individuals, especially public figures, more vulnerable [1]. Chinese female athletes frequently find themselves at the centre of online controversies, facing harsh criticism and gender based discrimination. The Chinese Women's National Volleyball Team, for instance, has been subjected to extensive online abuse [2]. The anonymity of the internet further enables defamation with little accountability, causing significant psychological harm [3]. Despite the increasing severity of cyber violence, research on its specific impact on Chinese female athletes remains limited [4]. Existing studies largely address cyberbullying in broader professional contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how female athletes experience and respond to online abuse. This study employs qualitative research methods, using case studies to analyze the nature and consequences of cyber violence. It examines

the online harassment faced by Gu Ailing (Eileen Gu) due to her national identity and career choices and explores how media and public opinion shape online discourse. Through comparative analysis, it investigates different forms of cyber violence, its effects on athletes' personal and professional lives, and how female athletes from other countries respond to similar challenges. By identifying key social, cultural, and technological factors contributing to online harassment, this study aims to provide actionable recommendations for athletes, sports organizations, media platforms, and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

Cyber violence sums up the malicious online acts done through digital technology, such as violence, harassment, bullying, and threats [5]. This can take the form of cyber-bullying, the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, and gender-based hate speech [6]. Victims may suffer heavy emotional strain in terms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem [7]. With the unrestricted availability of the internet, harassment can be continuous, and victims can never have a break. Besides affecting mental health, this violence also inflicts blood-curdling harm on the biography of now-public individuals like sportspeople. Such harassment could, and has, impinged on their reputations, leading them to miss sponsorship deals and lose viable career paths [8]. It may affect popular perceptions, resulting in criminals being stigmatized or blamed, thus exacerbating the trauma.

There is a unique socio-cultural context under which Chinese women athletes undergo increased scrutiny online. According to Chinese traditional gender norms, women often hold secondary positions, and going against these norms, as depicted by women athletes, can trigger intense online outrage [9]. Their achievements are downplayed through stereotypical expressions of feminine existence or biographies by the media. This environment constitutes a cultural context within which there is an inbuilt tendency toward discrimination against the female, thus rendering them susceptible to cyberbullying [10]. Social media provides a site for the possibility to build a public persona, but, in many instances, they also become a public forum for judgment and abuse. The facelessness of the web, along with its broad reach in getting news to many users, encourages people to spread toxic online content wider to create narratives that can work against the reputation and well-being of the athlete.

As a reaction to the phenomenon of cyber violence, sportspeople, sporting organizations, and justice systems have utilized different measures. Sportspeople tend to utilize personal coping strategies, which may include reducing their social media use or accessing psychological support. Sporting organizations can also provide media education and counseling services to facilitate the ability of athletes to manage online interactions. In a few jurisdictions, legislation has been passed to deal with online harassment, but enforcement is complicated by the very same borderless nature of the internet and attendant jurisdictional problems [11]. In spite of these initiatives, there are important limitations. Legal protections in place may not extend fully to all types of cyber violence, and social interventions either lack requisite resources or sufficient penetration. Furthermore, more holistic policies addressing the underlying causes of cyber violence, such as societal attitudes and the role of media in gender stereotyping, must be developed. If the underlying issues are not tackled, existing measures are merely cosmetic and will not provide ongoing protection and support for victims.

3. Case Study and Cause Analysis: Gu Ailing's Online Abuse Incident

3.1. Background Summary

Gu Ailing, also known as Eileen Gu, was the subject of a lot of internet debate when she decided to represent China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Since she was born and raised in America, where she was raised by her Chinese mother and American father, her choice led to debates on nationalism, responsibility, and identity. Whereas most in China hailed her success as emblematic of national power, her critics—primarily from Western nations—charged her with leaving the United States for political and financial purposes [12]. Such a polarized reaction positioned Gu at the intersection of international geopolitics and gendered criticism.

Media served to fan the controversy. Chinese state media depicted her as a national icon, whereas Western media questioned her identity and underlying motivations [13]. Social media channels such as Weibo, Twitter, and TikTok turned into sites for nationalist discourse, resulting in large-scale cyber bullying [10]. As compared to male athletes who have switched national teams without significant opposition, Gu was subjected to gendered attacks, with personal intrusions taking centre stage over her achievement on the sports track [9].

3.2. Forms of Cyber Violence

Gu Ailing faced multiple forms of cyber violence, reflecting the widespread online abuse against female athletes. Social media platforms facilitate racist, sexist, and nationalist insults, which is perceived as a major form of cyberbullying [14]. She was accused of being a "traitor" or using her Chinese heritage for financial gain. These attacks carried strong gendered elements, portraying her as deceitful in ways male athletes rarely face. Hostility escalated due to false citizenship claims and fabricated sponsorship deals [15]. More than 40% of Chinese internet users report experiencing online harassment, with public figures, especially women, being disproportionately affected [16]. Studies show that 87% of elite female athletes faced gender-biased abuse in 2023 [17]. Unlike male athletes, who are primarily judged on performance, female athletes endure scrutiny over appearance, behavior, and national loyalty. Nationalist-driven online campaigns played a crucial role because organized groups conducted widespread harassment campaigns on social media platforms including Weibo and Twitter [18]. Chinese-American figure skater Zhu Yi faced a flood of online hate for her Olympic performance while Wang Luyao became a cyberbullying target following her competition results [19, 20].

Social media design exacerbates these attacks. Weibo's trending algorithm amplifies negative posts, and Twitter's retweet feature accelerates harmful narratives. Anonymity enables abusers to evade accountability, while media manipulation increases public fury. Even statements meant to inspire, such as Gu's call to "break boundaries," was politicized [21]. Despite the rising severity of cyber violence, research on its specific impact on Chinese female athletes remains limited, highlighting the need for stronger digital protection.

3.3. Analysis of Causes

Social, cultural, and psychological factors collectively fueled the cyber violence against Gu Ailing. One major social determinant was the influence of public opinion and media portrayals. American and Chinese media framed her story through ideological lenses—Chinese media celebrated her as a national heroine, while American media questioned her loyalty and cash incentives [9]. The ideological divide triggered politically motivated online attacks, particularly regarding her dual citizenship.

Gender discrimination played an even greater role. Chinese female athletes face stricter moral expectations than their male counterparts, rooted in Confucian ideals that praises a female's submissiveness, modesty, and family duties. Women in sports are judged beyond their athletic ability, facing scrutiny over personal choices, patriotism, and public behaviour. Male athletes, on the other hand, such as basketball player Zhou Qi, rarely endure such intense questioning of their national standing or career choices [22]. The historical burden of women representing virtue and national pride intensifies this scrutiny, making female athletes symbols of both national identity and femininity. Any deviation from these expectations invites public backlash. Gu's independence and confidence were perceived as defiance of traditional Chinese female virtues, further fueling online outrage [18]. Meanwhile, patriarchal norms in the sport position men as natural competitors, with women must "prove" their legitimacy. Gu's financial success and sponsorship deals were criticized exploitative rather than deserved, reflecting broader gender biases [23].

Social media platforms such as Weibo and Twitter amplify gendered attacks. Their algorithms favour viral and controversial content, enabling cyber mobs to organize and harass individuals with anonymity [23]. Research show women athletes face more often and personal attacks than male athletes, often centered on their appearance, perceived arrogance, or alleged disloyalty. These criticisms reveal entrenched cultural prejudices and rigid societal expectations [9].

Economic factors also contributed. Sensationalized narratives in self-media exaggerated her story for engagement [2]. Misinformation and false narratives spread quickly, creating an online backlash. Coupled with social and cultural factors, psychological factors were also involved in such attacks. The anonymity of social media provided individuals with the opportunity to commit acts of violence free from the repercussions of the physical world [24]. Furthermore, Gu had the pressure of national expectations on her shoulders. As a burgeoning athlete torn between the opposing expectations of Chinese and American fans, Gu had an impossible choice between the two narratives, with failure to meet either one inviting public fury [25].

3.4. Comparative Analysis

The online bullying of Gu Ailing reflects broader patterns of cyber violence against women athletes while also highlighting significant cultural distinctions. Comparing her case with those of Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, reveals how online abuse varies across socio-political environments [26].

Simone Biles faced cyberbullying after withdrawing from Olympic competitions due to mental health issues. However, the criticism she received focused on perceptions of mental weakness rather than national allegiance. This indicates that although Western spectators take part in cyber violence, the form it takes is defined by cultural notions regarding mental well-being and athletics performance [27]. Similarly, Japanese-Haitian tennis player Naomi Osaka experienced online hate, particularly after she spoke about racial justice and mental health. Unlike Gu, whose online abuse was nationalism-driven, Osaka's was radicalized, with critics questioning her identity as both Black and Japanese player [23]. These cases demonstrate that while online violence is universal in scope, its manifestation nature is guided by cultural, gender, and racial factors.

4. Consequences of Cyber Violence

4.1. Impact on Female Athletes

The consequences of cyber violence extend beyond the virtual sphere, significantly affecting female athletes' mental health, career paths, and overall well-being. The round-the-clock monitoring, harassment, and focused attacks create a toxic environment that can lead to long-term

psychological distress. Evidence shows that prolonged exposure to online harassment is linked to increased anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem [10]. The majority of female athletes report heightened stress levels, sleep disturbance, and social withdrawal as a result of cyberbullying. Compared to strictly performance-based criticism, cyber violence is more likely to target personal identity, amplifying emotional pain [9]. The emotional toll of cyber violence also influences athletic performance. Athletes like Gu Ailing, Naomi Osaka, and Simone Biles have openly discussed the pressures that they endure, which go beyond performances to include the challenges of dealing with public opinion. The on-going worry about potential criticism online may result in avoiding the spotlight and reduced interaction with fans, further alienating the athletes from their supporter networks [22]. In extreme instances, some athletes have temporarily halted their careers or even prematurely retired due to the overwhelming psychological strain [14].

Beyond mental health, cyber violence has the potential to influence an athlete's sponsorship opportunities and reputation. In the digital era, sponsorship deals are crucial for athletes' financial standing, but brands often avoid associating with those entangled in controversy, regardless of the validity of the criticisms.[18]. The propensity has an even more acute effect on women athletes, who already face gender-related challenges in securing sponsorship deals compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, negative online narratives have the potential to impact public opinion, making it difficult for athletes to maintain a positive brand reputation [15]. The fact that professional insecurity and psychological pressure are in a state of tension proves that cyber violence transcends individual problems but is a systemic issue prevalent across the sport business.

4.2. Social and International Impact

Beyond individual players, cyber violence reinforces gender stereotypes, particularly within Chinese society. Online harassment often stems from conventional gender roles that prescribe acceptable behaviour for women in the public sphere. When women athletes behave independently, confront established power, or achieve outstanding success in their respective sports, they tend to receive harsher criticism compared to male athletes [25]. The recurrent theme of such gendered cyber onslaughts adds credibility to the reality that female athletes—and public women in general—are expected to conform to certain societal roles or risk facing dire repercussions. Additionally, sensationalized media outlets exacerbate this issue by focusing on titillating headlines rather than objective reporting. Digital media, fueled by user engagement-oriented algorithms, exacerbate the propagation of polarizing information, thus creating a cycle where bad news propagates more rapidly than positive tales [23]. On an international level, the prevalence of cyber violence against Chinese women athletes also tarnishes China's international image in the world of sports. As China strives to emerge as a powerhouse of international sport, the intimidation of its own athletes puts the country's sports culture into question [28]. Incidents of cyber harassment that receive global attention, such as the backlash against criticism of Gu Ailing, serve to reinforce impressions of pervasive nationalism and gender imbalances within sports discourse in China. Such dynamics have implications for China's aspirations to recruit foreign talent, forge international partnerships, and project a positive image within the sports world [21].

In response, international organizations have called for greater accountability from sports governing bodies and social media companies. Some countries have introduced stricter legislation to reduce online harassment, but enforcement remains inconsistent [23]. Though China has made efforts to control online communication, more concerted efforts—including stronger legal recourse for athletes, mental support, and public awareness campaigns—are needed to promote a more secure internet space. Both domestically and abroad, it is important this problem is solved to allow female athletes to compete and succeed without fear of online violence.

5. Coping Strategies and Policy Recommendations

For female sportspeople experiencing cyber violence, developing effective coping mechanisms is key in reducing its professional and psychological impacts. Psychological counselling, alongside mental toughness training, assists players in dealing with stress, anxiety, and emotional upset emanating from online violence [22]. Most sporting institutions offer access to mental health practitioners with experience in guiding high-performance athletes to build resilience for dealing with cyberbullying. Cognitive-behavioural therapy and mindfulness training further support athletes in reinterpreting negative experiences and staying focused [10]. Another significant strategy is social media management. Some athletes limit online engagement, disable comments, or outsource their accounts to professionals [12]. Training in digital literacy also prepares them to respond to misinformation. Having a sound support network comprising family, peers, and mentors is also pivotal in developing emotional stability and a positive self-concept amidst online abuse [23].

Media and sports institutions must take proactive measures to protect athletes from cyber violence. Enhancing in-house support structures within sports associations and clubs can prepare sports persons with the necessary tools to deal with online abuse. Key interventions involve mental health support, confidential reporting channels, and crisis response teams specializing in cyber harassment [14]. Online monitoring systems can also detect abusive content prior to it causing further escalation [18]. Social media must be regulated. Although anti-harassment policies exist, their enforcement is not consistent. Tighter content moderation, AI-driven abuse detection, and improved reporting tools can help make the internet a safer space [23]. Social media companies and sports organizations can collaborate to establish more robust protections without suppressing free speech [25]. Besides, there is a need to enhance media ethics. Sensationalist reporting fuels cyber bullying as it constructs societal perception. Employing ethical journalism practices, encouraging gender-sensitive reporting, and providing equitable representation of women athletes could mitigate online abuse [12].

At a national level, legal frameworks should be strengthened to combat cyber violence. Although China punishes harassment and defamation on the internet, enforcing remains challenging. Clarifying legal definitions of cyber violence, increasing penalties for offenders, and creating specialized cybercrime units could enhance better protection for athletes [21]. Provision of legal assistance and simple reporting mechanisms to victims can also help athletes feel confident to prosecute abuse on the internet [22]. Another essential element of long-term prevention is public education. Nationwide responsible digital behaviour campaigns can promote a more positive online culture by supporting digital ethics, critical media literacy, and consideration of the impact of cyber violence [22]. Curriculum in schools and universities can address gender stereotyping within online language, which can dismantle harmful stereotypes that propel the disproportionate harassment of women athletes [15].

6. Conclusion

This study highlights how social media, cultural norms, and gender biases contribute to the disproportionate targeting of female athletes, leading to severe psychological and professional repercussions. The findings reveal that cyber violence takes the form of online harassment, gendered abuse, and nationalist-inspired abuse, compounded by media hype and algorithmic amplification by platforms. The effects are increased anxiety, depression, and loss of career prospects, as well as consolidating negative gender stereotypes and tarnishing China's global sports reputation. The study proposes coping strategies for the athletes, such as psychological counseling and social media management, and policy and institutional recommendations, such as stricter platform regulation, stronger legal protection, and education campaigns. Despite its contributions,

this study has certain limitations. The reliance on qualitative case studies constrains the generalizability of the results to a wider population. Subsequent research could include quantitative approaches, such as surveys or large-N data analyses, to gain a clearer sense of trends within cyber violence. In addition, the study tended to concentrate on high-profile athletes, potentially overlooking the experiences of less prominent female athletes who may experience distinctive types of online abuse. Increasing the sample to involve more types of athletes yield more extensive results. Further, a broader literature review incorporating international perspectives would better contextualize the unique challenges faced by Chinese female athletes within the global reality of cyber violence. Follow-up studies should address a number of issues. First, a study of the long-term professional and psychological effects of cyber violence on athletes may give a better understanding of its structural repercussions. Second, research into how emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence, can be used to track and reduce online abuse may present novel solutions. Third, comparative analyses across various cultural and political environments may assist in determining effective means of addressing cyber violence globally.

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