

# *National Image Building During the Winter Olympics*

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**Abstract:** The Olympic Games are a world-renowned sporting event, including the Winter Olympics and the Summer Olympics. Most countries in the world participate in them and show their national images. In this paper, we analyze the contents released by mainstream media and athletes during the Winter Olympic Games. We believe that different platforms and media constitute multiple information subjects, and the national image disseminated through those subjects is pretty influential. Among them, mainstream media, athletes, and self-media convey the national image presented in the media events of the Winter Olympics. Self-media makes the audience another information source, which improves information transmission by processing and creating information, so that the national image represented by the Winter Olympics and related information influence the audience in multiple directions. Overall, the communication mode of multiple subjects strengthens the audience's ability to perceive the national image and makes the audience accept the national image conveyed in the events by interaction, authority, and other ways.

**Keywords:** Diverse subjects, Winter Olympic Games, communication, national image building.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the "deficit" in the flow of international communication, the "gap" between soft power and hard power, and the "contrast" between China's actual image and the Western's subjectivity have changed significantly. The problem of "other-shaping" rather than "self-shaping" has been relieved but still needs to be further addressed [1]. China's national image can hardly be reflected in international public opinion when it is controlled and influenced by significant forces. With the opportunity of hosting the Winter Olympics, the world's perception of China can be more realistic.

As an alternative form of the Olympic Games, the Winter Olympics have an unparalleled influence on world sports competition, with a large number of athletes, rich events, and substantial publicity, which can significantly promote communication in sports among audiences around the world. More importantly, the Winter Olympics can also provide different perspectives from different sources of information, such as Chinese athletes or periodicals, so that the world can understand a more real China and set aside the fabrication of China's image by anti-China forces, and a more realistic and diversified international image of China will be shaped.

This paper will take the content of the Winter Olympics in the international court of public opinion as the research object to show and analyze the process of shaping China's international image. From

China's perspective, this study will help China break the hegemony of the developed countries' discourse and present a more realistic image of China in the international public opinion arena without being misunderstood by the Western media. From the perspective of public opinion, China has not been able to present its true face in the Western context due to ideological differences and other issues. The real image of China can be restored through the public opinion during the Winter Olympics.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Definition of National Image**

Scholars have been studying the "image of the state" for a long time. According to an American scholar, Martin I. M., country image is a multidimensional construct that is "the sum of descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a particular country" [2]. S. Balogun et al. argue that country image is "the sum of perceptions and feelings about a country and is the sum of people's perceptions and feelings based on the overall impression formed by people based on all the variables of this country" [3]. The view of P. Kotler and others is more specific. They argue that the image of a country is the sum of one's personal experiences, perceptions, opinions, memories, and impressions of a country, and it includes one's emotions and aesthetics about the country [4]. According to Shouyuan Li, the image of a country refers to "the image of a sovereign state and nation in the international arena and the reflection of public opinion in the international environment" [5]. News media coverage is an important factor that affects the image of the state. As Xu Xiaoguo puts it, national image is "the image a country forms in the international news flow, or the image a country presents in the news speech reports of other countries' news media" [6].

### **2.2. Construction of National Image in the Media**

There are two modes of national image construction in mass media: static shaping by news clients and dynamic shaping by mass media. News clients are basically monopolistic media, and their image shaping is a repetitive process of "image shaping, data monitoring, information feedback, and image reconstruction."

Static shaping sets the identity of the media as the "shaper" and the user as the "shaper". The dynamic shaping of mass media is mainly user-generated contents, and the boundary between news production and news consumption is eliminated. In other words, the depth and breadth of users' cognition become the basis for recognizing and evaluating images, and their cognitive preferences and cognitive blind spots mark the generation of national image [7].

In recent years, short video media platforms, represented by Tik Tok, have emerged. On these platforms, a hybrid form of official media and mass media has emerged to strengthen China's national image in three main ways. 1. Emotional expressions trigger empathy and generate cultural identity. 2. Harmonious national image is shown from the perspective of civilian life. 3. Communication barriers are broken by conveying cultural stories to different countries around the world [8]. The format of short video effectively enhances the ability of information dissemination, and the video-based information enhances the audience's impression of the national image represented by the information source.

### **2.3. Mass Media and National Image**

International public opinion generally refers to the sum of attitudes and opinions of nation-states on issues of common interest in the international public space [9]. International public opinion in the age of new media is of great significance. Because of its relative consistency, intensity, and continuity, public opinion, once generated, becomes an important force of social control, influencing people's

thoughts, consciousness, the course of related events, and even social development. De-state centrality, de-government management, and mass media, these features of new media communication are building a new international political reality and influencing the formation of international public opinion and its direction [10]. Audiences receive international public opinion through news media and self-media, which then form the images of different countries.

The influence of international public opinion on national image is mainly based on soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye, who considered it as "the ability to get others to voluntarily pursue what you want through attraction rather than coercion" [11]. It can provide a continuous, dynamic, and reliable platform for public opinion, through which the image of the country represented by the athletes can deeply influence the audience. The Winter Olympics work as a medium and the international public opinion it affects depend on the online platform for its dissemination.

International opinion carriers are increasingly located on electronic social platforms, among which international media are dominated by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok, while the Chinese are mainly concentrated on "Weibo", "WeChat", and news clients. New media have features such as "real-name authentication enhancing the authority and reliability of public opinion" and "large user base giving public opinion a scale effect". The factors affecting public opinion are mainly reflected in the "number of users", "opinion leaders", and "government response" [12]. In the study of Facebook, there are many factors that influence the public opinion on it. For example, Winter, S. et al. argue that in news-related stories, exemplary comments are less influential than comments from opinion leaders. That is, opinion leaders are more likely to receive more recognition than the most popular comments [13]. According to Leong, A. D. and Ho, S. S., the credibility of sources influences people's willingness to express their opinions and moderates the consistency of public opinion [14]. In general, mass media platforms are characterized by "fragmentation", "diverse information channels", and "extremely fast circulation".

### 3. Subject Analysis

#### 3.1. Mascot IP Marketing and National Image

For this Winter Olympics, China's official media has developed various publicity programs. First, the IP of the Winter Olympics mascot will help shape China's national image. Taking one of the mascots of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Bing Dwen Dwen, for example, it is an adjusted scale giant panda, but its proportions are more towards anime characters with larger eyes and an oval shape. Choosing this mascot to represent China will help the audience to change their interpretation of China's image. The traditional symbolic representation of China is the oriental dragon, which is easily to be misunderstood due to the different cultural background. However, the image of Bing Dwen Dwen avoids this problem. It is simple and straightforward, creating a cute image that fits well with China's consistent image of harmony. The official media also uses the IP of Bing Dwen Dwen to sell peripheral products, promotes its IP, and uses online marketing to repeat the cycle, thus achieving a positive feedback on the country's image.

For example, Gido Tsujioka (Gido Dwen Dwen), a Japanese journalist who was very fond of Bing Dwen Dwen is a typical case. The mainstream media, led by People's Daily, reported his fondness for Bing Dwen Dwen. The report highlighted the Japanese journalist's description of Bing Dwen Dwen, including "cute", "healing", and other positive features. A large number of reports created large-scale advertising and marketing, followed by the big sell of Bing Dwen Dwen-related products and consumers' obsession with Bing Dwen Dwen. Through agenda setting, mainstream media selectively released news related to Bing Dwen Dwen, giving audience the impression that it was popular internationally and was selling well. As a result, the national image represented by the mascot is accepted. The national image includes the audience's aesthetic evaluation of a country. Bing Dwen

Dwen, as a mascot, effectively shows the fact that Chinese aesthetics has been recognized by the world, and the products derived from this IP make full use of marketing to strengthen the audience's positive perception, thus making the country's image more positive at both levels of reality and media opinion.

## **3.2. Mainstream Media and Self-Media on National Image Shaping**

### **3.2.1. Mainstream Media**

The coverage of the Winter Olympics mainly focuses on the results and process of the event and the athletes' related deeds. In this Winter Olympics, the official Chinese media followed the pace of the sporting events and shaped the images of several athletes while shaping the image of China. For example, during the Winter Olympics, People's Daily not only reported the results of various competitions but also focused on Chinese athletes in the ongoing events, among whom Eileen Gu, who won several medals, was introduced and shaped on several levels. People's Daily's coverage of Eileen Gu began with the honors she received. As a Chinese athlete, every honor that Eileen Gu receives gives the audience a sense of China's national strength and, in doing so, shapes China's national image.

Moreover, People's Daily has repeatedly reported on Eileen Gu and the Chinese elements in her, including her outspoken love for Chinese specialties. These elements can show more cultural symbols to the audience, and then the national image can be presented to the audience in a combination of cultural symbols, thus reaching the purpose of shaping the national image. Secondly, in the report of People's Daily, the image of Eileen Gu is not only an athlete but also a combination of multiple identities, which is close to a real individual. Instead of only an athlete or a group of symbols, she is also an ordinary person with a lively atmosphere, which has a very strong resonance with the audience. People's Daily has reported various interview records and moments of Eileen Gu, influencing the identity shaping of the athlete through the authority of the official account, reducing the spiritual distance between the audience and the athlete, and finally letting the image of China carried by the athlete penetrate into the audience's perception.

### **3.2.2. Self-Media**

While athletes' communication of information is a point-to-point process, the amplification of their behavior by self-media is a sort of near-peer-to-peer communication process using their own social networks. The communicative influence of self-media and mainstream media is interactive [15]. The information dispersed by athletes and government-driven mainstream media is bound to gain a lot of attention and set the tone of public opinion because of their status and halo effect. The content they publish will receive a lot of secondary processing by self-media without any opposition, including the organizing the athletes' behaviors and editing the highlights of athletes' sports and athletic events. These contents will spread to major media platforms, creating a wide influence. For example, there are a large number of splendid clips of skaters on YouTube from personal accounts, and athletes' biographies will also appear on media platforms. The data interconnection between this information and media enhances the viewers' impressions of athletes through the intertwined effect of multiple platforms. Impressions of athletes contain the image of the country they represent. When the audience's impressions of them continue to strengthen, the country's image will also be strengthened in their memories. At the same time, the audience receiving the information can connect the content they post with the athletes by tagging on the self-media platform, and other users can read and browse the related content under this tag. Eventually, the peer-to-peer communication will cover the unofficial contents of athletes, forming an interwoven network of information and shaping the country's image in three dimensions.

### **3.3. The Impact of Athletes' Personal Accounts on the Image of the Country**

Athletes, as representatives of the country, can influence people's perceptions of the national image by their performances on and off the field. They are the most flexible and direct individuals in the construction of the country's image [16]. Shaping the image of the country through athletes is mainly composed of two parts: the guidance of public opinion by the athlete on social platforms and the shaping of the image of the country by the athletes' performance. Public opinion reflecting subjectivity will be mainly discussed below while the latter will be explained briefly.

#### **3.3.1. Sportsmanship and National Image**

As an offshoot of the Summer Olympics, the Winter Olympics still inherit the spirit of "higher, faster, and stronger", and the athletes' competition is the embodiment of this concept. When they embody such spirit in competitive sports, "national image is reflected by a specific person or thing in a certain field that represents the historical and cultural development of the country in that field through a specific channel" [16]. This spirit will also correspond to the shaping of the national image. For example, the quality of "hard work" can be shown in the behavior of an individual, but also in the history and culture of a country, so that the audience can feel this attribute and the image of the country is successfully shaped. The content posted in athletes personal accounts about their games is a constant reminder to the audience that their games show the spirit of hard work. This reminder allows the audience to gradually feel and recognize the spiritual qualities carried by the athletes, and the group image of athletes in the Olympic Games can concretize the abstraction of the national image during cross-cultural communication. The viewers associate with the country through the athletes and the qualities shown by the athletes will be attached to the image of the country.

#### **3.3.2. Athletes' Voices and National Image**

In addition to the spiritual qualities of athletes that are amplified by the media, the content posted by athletes can also shape the overall image of the country by guiding public opinion. Previous analysis has pointed out that "any close, strong-signal, high-density information contact will produce near-objective, accurate, and comprehensive perceptions and evaluations" [17]. For example, U.S. athletes directly praised the delicious and popular food in the Beijing Winter Olympics. Some U.S. athletes also praised the effectiveness of China's vaccination, expressing their approval of the different vaccination models. When the international media is multi-voiced and the news is regulated by various forces, this kind of message of the athletes' real experiences reinforces the authenticity of the country's image building. The athlete will choose to publish what he or she sees and agrees with. Factors that influence facts, such as politics and authority, are limited, and the athlete is more effective in publishing all types of possible authentic information. In turn, because the information athletes release is more casual and harder to control, people are more likely to trust what they see and hear. Overall, the subjectivity of athletes gives them the ability to create a more authentic image of the country. This ability can have a positive effect on the image of the country.

### **3.4. Multiple Subject Theory Analysis**

In the public opinion of the Winter Olympics, relevant information presented by multiple subjects and multiple media forms a field about the event. Athletes are the subjects carrying the symbols of the national image shaped by the Winter Olympics. Their voices on social media have a strong authority and play a leading role in conveying the public opinion of the national image. According to communication science, people build shared meanings in their communication and interaction with each other, especially through the shared experience that prompts the alignment of each other in terms

of culture, experience, and cognition [18]. Athletes show the quality and spirit they carry by their actions on the field of play and use the wide communication power of modern mass media to create media events featuring themselves and deliver elements of the national image they carry to the audience in a point-to-point mode. At the same time, the mainstream media will use agenda-setting to display media events featuring athletes to form another communication subject, using the national and ethnic elements already presented by athletes to build media events featuring authority and ritual. Such events place the audience in a set scenario, allowing them to access and receive information containing national image symbols in large quantities from time and the media environment. After identifying with the event and linking the main image of the athletes, the audience forms a composite cognition of the national image and finally obtains a cognitive feeling about the country in public opinion.

On the other hand, multi-subject communication effectively avoids the didactic communication brought by mainstream media and transforms the positioning of information sources into information transmitters through the adjustment of the overall structure, allowing audiences to trust more. Mainstream media mainly disseminates carefully-selected content, and the information delivered is mainly characterized by speed and authority. The information released through self-media platforms is composite. The verbal and video forms have few contents. The audience does not need to face the authority. Instead, there are more daily and easy-to-understand content. The efficiency of information dissemination is increased, and the credibility is relatively improved. Finally, the subject on self-media platforms can deliver information during interaction, which eventually leads to effective secondary or even multiple dissemination. Information on the same topic and trend is constantly reinforced and absorbed in the first creation and multiple recreations of the content, and the audience will have no doubts about the authenticity of the content and will have more possibility to participate in the process of creating such content (for example, by posting comments in a joking manner). thus spreading the information to their own social circles, which has become the main body of the message delivery, and enhancing the dissemination of the message in a small area. In this way, both the information that actively highlights the image of the country and the information that is accompanied by the image of the country is trusted by the audience, and the information that is disseminated in this way is repeated and authenticated in many ways, and the image of the country that is attached to it is deeply experienced by the audience.

#### 4. Summary

In this paper, we review the definition of national image and the influence of international public opinion on the national image. The latter uses the Winter Olympics as a case study. The paper argues that the public opinion of the Winter Olympics, mainstream media and self-media, athletes, official accounts, and secondary creators form a multiple information dissemination model, in which various events emerging from the Winter Olympics are disseminated to the audience with different focuses through multiple channels. Mainstream media and official accounts present contents in an authoritative way, while athletes and secondary creators present contents in an interactive way. The multiple ways brought by the multiple subjects allow the national image in the media event to be implicitly penetrated into the audience's memory, forming an effective national image building. This paper still has some limitations. It analyzes the influence of public opinion on the image of the country from the perspective of communicators but does not analyze the audience with specific research. It lacks the analysis of the cognitive process of the audience and some empirical evidence.

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