

Research on Social Media Brand Image Building and Marketing Strategies for Female Athletes in the Era of Mass Audiences

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Abstract: Amidst the digital wave, social media has reshaped sports information dissemination, offering female athletes opportunities to escape traditional media's monolithic portrayals and cultivate personalized brands. However, the traffic-driven era brings contradictions between exposure and anxiety, alongside image alienation. This study examines Zheng Qinwen and Eileen Gu through case analysis and literature review, exploring strategies for female athletes to build their social media brands in the traffic era. Findings reveal that brand images have evolved from collective honor-driven "symbolization" to "initial breaking of boundaries" in early social media phases, culminating in "multi-dimensional brand construction" in the traffic era. Persistent challenges include subtle gender bias, unequal resource allocation, disparities in commercial monetization, and distorted "female empowerment." Key influencing factors include alignment of personal traits with athletic achievements, platform characteristics, fan demands, and brand collaboration models. Based on this, the study proposes a "core+derivative" content system with tiered fan engagement, agenda-setting and philanthropic initiatives to enhance social impact, and mechanisms for integrating commercial and social value. This framework offers practical guidance for female athletes and teams, promoting the multifaceted release and healthy development of women's sports value.

Keywords: Female Athletes, Commercial Value, Social Media, Marketing Approaches, Brand Image

1. Introduction

As social media profoundly reshapes the sports information ecosystem, academic research on athletes' social media brand building has evolved from early descriptive analyses of communication phenomena to strategic evaluations and value explorations. However, significant research gaps persist in the female athlete segment: Existing studies lack systematic analysis of the unique challenges female athletes face in the era of traffic-driven platforms, such as the implicit perpetuation of gender bias and the commercial commodification of "female strength." The evolutionary mechanism of brand image—transitioning from traditional media's "collective symbolization" to social media's "personal IP-ization"—has yet to be distilled into a phased

theoretical framework within the Chinese sports context. Furthermore, there is a lack of strategic systems that balance athletic professionalism with feminine characteristics in the synergistic conversion pathways between commercial value and social influence.

This study employs case analysis and literature review, focusing on Zheng Qinwen and Eileen Gu as representative subjects to explore three key issues: First, how female athletes leverage social media to transcend the traditional "performance-centric" narrative framework and achieve multidimensional brand image construction; Second, the operational mechanisms of gender cognitive biases and unequal resource allocation within traffic algorithmic logic on brand shaping; Third, how to develop operational strategies integrating competitive prowess, expression of feminine values, and commercial sustainability. By deconstructing the athletes' differentiated practices in content creation, platform adaptation, and commercial partnerships, this study not only fills a gap in localized case research on female athletes' social media branding but also aims to provide practical frameworks for athlete teams. It holds theoretical and practical significance for advancing women's sports from "performance-centric communication" to "value-centric communication" and improving gender equality within the sports industry ecosystem.

2. Historical context of female athletes' social media branding

2.1. Historical evolution of female athletes' brand image

In the pre-social media era, media resources were concentrated in traditional outlets. Female athletes' images were shaped by mainstream narratives, exhibiting a "uniform" character oriented toward collective honor. Media coverage then emphasized achievements and honors, highlighting national pride while neglecting athletes' individual traits. Their images were simplified into "hero" or "champion" symbols, lacking multidimensionality. For instance, Olympic coverage often highlighted the fighting spirit of female gold medalists while rarely touching on their lives outside the arena, leading to a one-sided public perception and limiting personal brand development [1].

With the rise of the internet, social media emerged as a new platform for female athletes to showcase themselves. They leveraged this space to break free from the constraints of collective honor symbols. By sharing training routines, personal reflections, and interacting with fans, they achieved an "initial breakthrough" in their brand image, revealing more personalized traits. On early blogs and social networking sites, female athletes used text and images to present their off-field personas. Though brand building was still nascent, it laid a solid foundation for their personal brand development. Simultaneously, social media news coverage increasingly emphasized the return of female athletes' social identities, reshaping their media image to some extent [2].

In the era of traffic-driven platforms, social media has become the core battleground for female athletes' brand building, facilitating "multi-dimensional brand construction" [3]. Diverse platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram offer abundant display windows. Female athletes have broken free from traditional media constraints, taking control of their brand narratives through personalized strategies that showcase multidimensional personas: posting training videos to demonstrate athletic prowess, sharing fashion and beauty content to highlight lifestyle tastes, and engaging in trending discussions to convey personal perspectives. This multidimensional approach effectively amplifies personal influence and attracts substantial fan followings [4].

2.2. The real challenges of female athlete branding in the traffic era

Female athletes often face greater scrutiny over their appearance than their athletic performance. A 2024 survey revealed that 72% of British female athletes reported experiencing gender discrimination in sports [5]. This bias forces them to navigate a tension between projecting a "professional image" and conforming to societal expectations of femininity. This disconnect not only creates a gap between commercial opportunities and athletic achievements but also erodes self-identity and can even influence training decisions. Within China's basketball landscape, women also confront gender inequality. In school competitions, women's games lag significantly behind men's in match frequency, media coverage, venue quality, and scheduling. Basketball clubs and associations remain male-dominated, limiting female participation opportunities, with key training sessions and matches disproportionately allocated to men. Evaluation criteria further diverge: male players are primarily assessed on technical skill, athletic ability, and performance, while female athletes face additional scrutiny over appearance and physique [6].

In terms of resource allocation and operational capacity, significant disparities exist in the support received by female athletes across different sports. Athletes in popular sports often gain greater media exposure and brand partnership opportunities, while those in less popular sports face resource shortages, making it difficult to conduct effective brand-building activities. Furthermore, even within the same sport, athletes' operational capabilities vary considerably due to factors like personal background and the strength of their management agencies. Some athletes lack professional social media management knowledge and skills, struggling to develop effective brand strategies, create engaging content, and interact with fans—resulting in suboptimal brand-building outcomes.

As female athletes' personal brand influence grows, commercial monetization has become a key objective in their branding efforts. However, the income gap between male and female athletes remains substantial. This disparity is evident across all sports disciplines: in 2024, the top 15 male athletes collectively earned \$1.89 billion, while the top 15 female athletes earned only \$221 million [7].

Moreover, the process of commercial monetization carries the risk of distorting the essence of "female power." Some brands, driven by commercial interests, may excessively package and exploit female athletes' images or use them as marketing gimmicks, overlooking the intrinsic spiritual qualities embodied by "female strength." This not only damages the brand image of female athletes but also misleads public perceptions of "female strength," causing their brand development to deviate from the correct path.

Breaking through these practical challenges is not only about individual and industry development but also reflects the need for deep structural change in society. From a gender equality perspective, female athletes overcoming prejudice is essentially a practice of reshaping societal cognitive frameworks. On an industrial level, innovation in their brand-building models injects new momentum into the sports economy, driving the industry toward more inclusive and sustainable directions. For individual growth, equitable resource allocation mechanisms and professional operational support build a healthy career development ecosystem, achieving an organic unity between personal value and social value. This multidimensional breakthrough actively responds to the opportunities and challenges of the traffic era while providing a vivid case study for exploring social development pathways in the digital age.

3. Case study: social media branding strategies for female athletes

Zheng Qinwen and Eileen Gu were selected as representative yet distinct case studies: both are exemplary Chinese female athletes. Zheng Qinwen focuses on tennis, anchoring her breakthrough in the sports vertical with "ambition + prowess"; Eileen Gu crosses into skiing, education, and fashion, building a "genius + diversity" cross-domain IP that spans different athletic tracks and audience demographics. From a research perspective, Zheng Qinwen exemplifies the traditional competitive sports path of "professional dedication + breaking boundaries through individuality," while Eileen Gu demonstrates the "cross-industry integration + global dissemination" model. Through comparative analysis, we can comprehensively decode the diverse logic behind female athletes' social media brand building, providing differentiated references for the industry.

3.1. Zheng Qinwen: a new-era role model combining ambition and talent

Zheng Qinwen cultivates an image as a "new-era female role model embodying both ambition and capability" on social media. On the court, her third-round victory over world No. 3 Jessica Pegula at the 2024 French Open showcased her fierce desire for triumph and determination to climb higher in the rankings. During the 2023-2024 WTA Tour season, she repeatedly advanced to quarterfinals, translating competitive ambition into tangible results. Training videos shared online showcase professional-grade power and precision in her strokes. Off the court, she shares her daily routines of studying English and reading books, showcasing a spirit of continuous self-improvement. This presents the public with a multifaceted image of a modern female athlete—one who combines fierce determination with intellectual depth.

Zheng Qinwen's team adopts a marketing strategy centered on athletic achievements while showcasing her personality through multiple dimensions. On the competitive front, they engage fans by sharing training highlights, pre-match preparations, and post-match reflections on social media around key tournaments, fostering a sense of participation. To highlight her personality, they regularly post glimpses of her personal life—interactions with family, moments enjoying food—to bridge the gap with fans. For brand collaborations, she partners with companies in sports equipment and health food sectors. In athletic gear, she is a Nike-sponsored athlete and also represents Wilson, a professional sports equipment brand under the Amer Sports umbrella. Ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics, Nike launched its "Not Everyone Can Be a Winner" campaign featuring Zheng. Following her championship win, searches for Nike's "The only souvenir I want from Paris is the gold medal" printed T-shirt surged 111% week-over-week. Since 2024, Nike's self-operated online tennis category has seen significant year-over-year growth, with white tennis skirts ranking as the top-selling item across all categories in Nike's official Douyin store [8]. In the health food sector, on April 26, 2024, Ba Wang Tea announced Zheng Qinwen as its inaugural "Health Ambassador."

Zheng Qinwen's brand-building and marketing strategy has, on one hand, elevated her commercial value, attracting more brand collaborations and providing a more solid material foundation for her career development. On the other hand, the ambition and strength she demonstrates have inspired countless young women, especially tennis-loving girls, encouraging them to dare to set ambitious goals and strive for them. This has promoted the popularity of tennis among female groups and conveyed the positive energy of independent and enterprising women in the new era to society [9].

3.2. Eileen Gu: the all-round branding of a prodigy

Eileen Gu's social media brand image is that of a "multi-faceted prodigy." Building on her Olympic champion status, she showcases extraordinary talent in skiing. Simultaneously, as a student at a prestigious university, she shares content like classroom studies and thesis writing, highlighting her academic excellence. Furthermore, she ventures into the fashion world, with photos and videos from various fashion events showcasing her unique style. She also actively engages in philanthropic causes, advocating for environmental protection and education, thereby crafting a multifaceted image that combines athletic talent, intellect, fashion sense, and social responsibility [10].

Eileen Gu's marketing strategy is characterized by "crossing multiple domains to precisely reach diverse audiences." In sports, she leverages the buzz of major events like the Olympics to amplify her achievements through social media, attracting sports enthusiasts. Her two gold and one silver medals at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics drove snowboard sales up 130% year-over-year [11]. In education, she shares learning experiences and methodologies, resonating with student audiences. Her "Stanford Study Vlog" on Bilibili has garnered over 30 million views. In fashion, she collaborates with luxury brands, posting styling and event updates on social media to engage fashion enthusiasts. As an IMG-signed model, she graced covers like Vogue China, with individual fashion posts on Instagram receiving over 500,000 likes. In philanthropy, she served as a UN Women Ambassador in 2024 to advance the "Girls in Sport" initiative and launched the "Bay Area Caring Mothers" program supporting 430 children [12].

Eileen Gu's comprehensive brand development has made her a global focal point, significantly enhancing her international influence and setting an exemplary model for Chinese athletes on the world stage. Her success has also increased public interest in freestyle skiing and other winter sports, contributing to the development of winter sports in China. Furthermore, her balanced approach to athletics, academics, and social philanthropy conveys a philosophy of multifaceted development to young people, inspiring them to pursue their passions while focusing on holistic self-improvement.

4. Factors influencing female athletes' social media branding

4.1. Personal traits and athletic performance

When traits and achievements form a positive coupling, synergistic effects emerge, amplifying the brand's overall influence. For instance, Chinese athlete Zhang Weili's elite performance in mixed martial arts (MMA) complements her resilience and decisiveness on the competition stage, rendering her brand image more multidimensional. Conversely, a disconnect between traits and achievements can render traits hollow without supporting accomplishments or obscure traits that hinder the conversion of achievements into brand value.

4.2. Social media platform characteristics

Twitter's immediacy and public discussion nature make it ideal for sharing event updates and expressing opinions, facilitating rapid public discourse. Instagram's visual orientation is better suited for showcasing athletes' lifestyles and image building. Additionally, TikTok leverages its highly interactive and entertaining short-video format to bridge the gap between athletes and fans through creative challenges and behind-the-scenes content [13]. Athletes must adapt brand messaging to each platform's unique characteristics to maximize communication effectiveness.

4.3. Fan base and market demand

As both recipients and participants in brand communication, the composition, behavioral patterns, and value aspirations of fan communities directly influence content selection and interaction strategies for female athletes' social media branding. The age structure, interest preferences, and media usage habits of fan groups determine how brand messages are received and the nature of feedback.

Market demand influences brand commercial value from the external environment. Trends in the sports industry, consumer attitudes, and preferences for brand collaborations shape the commercialization trajectory of athlete brands. The global rise of the women's sports consumer market is driving increased demand for brands centered on female empowerment themes. Fan base size and engagement levels serve as key indicators of market demand, and fulfilling these demands in turn nurtures the fan community, creating a virtuous cycle.

4.4. Brand partnerships and management agencies

Brand collaborations serve as a critical pathway for commercializing brand value and shaping brand image. The industry attributes, brand identity, and alignment of partner brands with the athlete's personal profile and sport directly impact collaboration effectiveness and value accumulation. As professional operational entities, agencies play a central role in strategic planning and execution for female athletes' social media brand development [14]. Their expertise manifests in precise brand positioning, systematic content strategy planning, effective resource integration, and timely crisis management.

5. Sustainable pathway for converting brand image into commercial value and social influence

5.1. Sustainable commercial value transformation: long-term social media operations strategy

Long-term social media operations are key to the sustainable conversion of female athletes' brand commercial value. By establishing a "core-derived" content system and fan engagement mechanisms, brands can solidify their professional image through training and competition content while enhancing relatability via lifestyle shares and personal perspectives. For instance, Serena Williams leverages social media to discuss workplace equality alongside her athletic achievements, reinforcing her tennis legend persona while expanding commercial partnerships.

Fan engagement must shift from "traffic accumulation" to "value retention" through precise segmentation and tiered maintenance. For core fans, technical workshops and exclusive training diaries boost loyalty; for casual fans, themed challenges and Q&A livestreams lower participation barriers.

5.2. Sustainable social impact building: strategies centered on female empowerment

Building social impact through female empowerment requires transcending stereotypes, uncovering shared values between athletes and their communities, and crafting deep brand narratives. These narratives should encompass three dimensions: stories of individual breakthroughs, driving project development, and addressing social issues. Practically, sustainability can be reinforced through a "agenda-setting + action implementation" strategy. Agenda-setting should integrate athletes' personal experiences with societal trends—for example, sprinter Wei Yongli sharing doubts about "women's physical inferiority to men" during training sparked discussions on female athletic potential. Action

implementation involves translating influence into tangible change through initiatives like launching public welfare projects or participating in industry standard-setting. When confronting prejudice, employing scientific explanations to dismantle it or adopting a "technical + emotional" dual narrative maintains professionalism while amplifying female voices and strength [15].

5.3. Synergistic development mechanism for commercial and social value

The key to synergizing commercial value and social impact lies in building a closed-loop system of "mutually reinforcing values." Brands should identify the intersection between commercial objectives and social issues during positioning to avoid value conflicts. Take U.S. gymnastics star Simone Biles as an example. Her management team prioritizes partnerships with brands demonstrating commitment to women's sports funding and body diversity inclusion. Collaborating with apparel brands advocating "size-inclusive sportswear" enables commercial monetization while reinforcing her social image of "breaking aesthetic biases," creating a virtuous cycle of "collaboration-promotion-recognition-renewed partnership."

Operationally, synergies can be achieved through two-way dynamics: "embedding philanthropy in commerce" and "commercial ventures supporting philanthropy." The former naturally integrates social value propositions into brand endorsements—like Eileen Gu conveying "women need not be defined" in an energy drink ad, blending commercial appeal with promoting female autonomy. The latter allocates resources from commercial revenue to public welfare, such as using endorsement fees to support sports education for rural girls. This not only enhances brand credibility but also provides emotional resonance for commercial activities. Additionally, establishing transparent disclosure mechanisms—such as regularly publishing impact reports that publicly document how commercial partnerships advance social projects—dispels public concerns about "charity marketing" and strengthens the foundation of trust for collaborative development.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the pathways, challenges, and transformation mechanisms of female athletes' social media brand building in the era of traffic. Findings reveal four primary challenges in their brand development: First, gender bias persists covertly, with media and public attention disproportionately focused on non-competitive factors like appearance; Second, unequal resource allocation creates significant disparities in exposure, commercial partnerships, and professional operational support across different sports and backgrounds. Third, the "female power" narrative risks being distorted in commercial monetization, with some brand collaborations prioritizing sensationalism over sportsmanship. Fourth, athletes must navigate the tension between professional identity and societal expectations of femininity, where identity pressures constrain authentic brand expression.

The study further reveals that brand-building effectiveness hinges on the alignment between personal traits and athletic achievements, platform dissemination characteristics, fan demographics and emotional needs, as well as brand partnership models and agency team capabilities. Based on the cases of Zheng Qinwen and Eileen Gu, this study proposes three practical pathways: First, establish a dual-engine system combining "professional athletic content + personalized derivative content." Through refined fan segmentation and operation mechanisms, transition from short-term traffic monetization to long-term user asset value conversion. Second, anchor value in authentic female empowerment by proactively organizing agenda-setting and philanthropic initiatives, transforming personal influence into a driving force for social progress. Finally, establish synergistic

mechanisms where commercial value and social impact mutually reinforce each other. This can be achieved through brand collaborations aligned with the athlete's ethos and innovative integration of philanthropic elements into commercial activities, thereby unifying economic and social benefits. Future research should further explore cutting-edge directions such as the revolutionary impact of AIGC technology on athlete brand narrative models, content strategy optimization under emerging trends in short-video platforms, best practices for cross-platform collaborative communication, and brand breakthrough strategies for athletes in niche sports. Such studies will deepen theoretical understanding of athlete brand development patterns in the digital era, providing scientifically effective practical guidance for the multifaceted release of women's sports value and the inclusive development of the sports industry.

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