

From Challengers to Contributors: A Peircean Semiotic Model of Chinese Sports Stars' Evolving Media Image in German Media

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Abstract. Before, Chinese sports stars often chose to go overseas for training after succeeding domestically in order to advance their skills. In contrast, the entry that the world-class athlete Fan Zhendong made into Europe's high-level competitive arena demonstrates a distinctive cross-cultural value and reflects a shift in Chinese athletes' overseas engagement model. By employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, this study conducts a quantitative analysis of German media reports and fan comments by explaining Fan Zhendong's participation in the Bundesliga. This approach connects the "encoding" side by the media and the "decoding" side by the audiences to analyze the construction of his cross-cultural media identity. The findings show that the German media construct the image of Fan Zhendong through a combination of global and local frames. The audience sentiment generally aligns with media narratives but shows greater diversity. These findings signal a shift in the overseas method of Chinese sports stars—from a "challenger" to a "contributor". This shift underscores that meaning is not fixed by media representation but negotiated through evolving audience interpretation. As a result, to make the cross-cultural communication more effective, this study must transcend one-way messaging, prioritize interactive meaning-making, locally resonant narratives, and symbols that encourage sustained engagement.

Keywords: Media Framing, Communication Semiotics, Transnational Sport, Chinese Athletes, Audience Reception

1. Introduction

The deepening of globalization has made the cross-border mobility of elite athletes a prominent phenomenon in sports communication. From Yao Ming in the NBA to Li Na's Grand Slam triumphs, Chinese athletes have consistently stood up on the world's premier sporting stages. Thus, going abroad is not merely a matter of individual career development but is closely linked to the projection of national image and cultural exchange. As a result, as sports stars are not only individual actors but also public symbols, the construction and interpretation of their media images in cross-cultural contexts is an important research issue.

Existing studies have mainly focused on "challenger-type" athletes such as Yao Ming and Li Na. Entering dominant sports systems as newcomers, the Western media always report their personal struggle and cultural adaptation or even resistance to institutional constraints. While such research has shed light on differences in media framing and underlying power structures, it tends to center on a single pattern of overseas engagement. With the overall rise of Chinese sports, the "challenger" framework no longer fits all, just like Fan Zhendong (Fan), who now actively participates in European leagues as a world top athlete; his presence not only reflects a competitive performance but also technical contributions and cultural communication. This evolving pattern has yet to be systematically examined.

Above all, there are two tensions that have not been underexplored. The first is the tension between globalized and localized framing in media representations of foreign athletes. The second one is the sentiment between media influence and audience in understanding the Fan-related reports. Although these questions have been discussed separately, few studies have addressed them in a unified way.

To address these questions, this study employs Fan Zhendong's participation in the 2025–2026 German Table Tennis Bundesliga as a case study. As the Peircean semiotic lens analyzes that the triadic relationship among media representations (signs), the athlete (object), and audience interpretations (interpretant) connects the processes of encoding and decoding, it offers a semiotic perspective on the cross-cultural representation and reception of Chinese sports stars. Doing so can also provide new insights into the evolving patterns of Chinese athletes' global engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dueling narratives: national heroes vs. individual stories in sino-western media framing

The existing research has developed into two main lines. One is to focus on how Chinese media construct the images of domestic sports stars. For example, a semiotic analysis of coverage on Yao Ming in major Chinese media shows that he is often represented in a dual framework that of a "transnational commercial elite" and a "modernized patriotism." Such portrayals heavily emphasize his national responsibility and the honor of bringing prestige to China [1]. Similarly, the historical reviews of Chinese sports heroes suggest that Chinese media have consistently linked athletes' achievements to the nation's fate, forming a distinctive "gold medal narrative" [2].

The other is to examine the Western media reports of Chinese sports stars, as Asia's economic rise and the global sports media market demographic clout. From a political economy perspective, scholars argue that as Western sports media markets approach saturation, Asia—given its large population and rapidly expanding consumer base—has become a key target market for European and American professional sports leagues [3]. A comparative analysis of Yao Ming across four media outlets shows that U.S. media tends to emphasize his "individual struggle" and "model minority" character, compared to Chinese media's "national hero" narrative [4]. Studies on Li Na reveal a starker contrast that Western media construct her as a "rebel" challenging institutional constraints, which differs from the portrayal by the Chinese official media [5]. Overall, Western reporting employs more diverse interpretive frameworks compared to China's relatively uniform framing in external communication [6,7].

2.2. Bridging encoding and decoding: peircean semiotic framework as an integrative lens

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics is a triadic model which links the sign (the perceptible form), the object (the referent), and the interpretant (the meaning generated in the interpreter's mind) [8].

Some researchers have introduced this framework into sports communication research and offer some analytical tools, such as metaphor and metonymy. They further argue that semiotic analysis should operate on two levels. The first is to examine the signifier–signified relationship within individual signs. And the second is to analyze how the combinations of multiple signs work together to construct more complex meanings [9]. Besides, other researchers have extended cross-media semiotic analyses of sports stars to demonstrate the value of the "three levels of the interpretant" in audience research, distinguishing among the immediate, dynamic, and final interpretants [10]. As media reports can be seen as a process of sign construction and fan commentary represents a generation of interpretants, this framework bridges the processes of encoding and decoding.

In contrast, the German scholarship on sports celebrities employs framing and discourse analysis more frequently. For instance, some studies have applied news value theory to examine the overall characteristics of German sports reporting [11]. Other studies have employed framing analysis to reveal the differences between German tabloids and broadsheets in their coverage of athletes. They find out that tabloids are more inclined toward personalized frames and sensationalized language [12]. In addition, some researchers have applied critical discourse analysis in order to examine how German media report on athletes with migrant backgrounds, showing how specific linguistic strategies are used to construct otherness [13]. These studies elucidate the German media's discursive strategies, the generation of semiotic processes of meaning, and the active role of audience interpretation.

2.3. Debate: diversity of sports stars' media images

2.3.1. Globalization and localization: differences in media encoding

The Western media agendas are also usually influenced by the underlying value orientations of media sources that are oriented towards globalizing and those oriented towards localizing, adopting varying approaches in reporting the same event [14]. This difference is also reasonable when it comes to reporting on sports celebrities. According to the so-called denationalization thesis, as globalization progresses, the connection between the nationality of athletes and their place of origin has grown less significant, and media images are becoming more and more detached from the national-state model [15]. This, however, differs with the media type. The globally oriented outlets tend to give more emphasis on the global qualities of the athletes, whereas the locally oriented media lay more emphasis on the emotional bond between the athletes and local audiences [7]. Non-Western athletes, who include Chinese sports stars, might, as a consequence, continue to be limited by some Western stereotypes, which hamper successful cross-cultural communication and affect [7]. This study believes that media outlets also navigate a tension strategically between globalizing and localizing frames, shaped by their market positioning and desired communicative effects.

For Fan Zhendong, the German media navigate two communicative pathways. One is a localizing perspective reporting him as a club insider, enhancing local narratives. The other one is a globalizing perspective, which highlights his symbolic significance as a Chinese world champion, boosting the league's international profile.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1a: When reporting Fan Zhendong, the frequency of use of "localizing" and "globalizing" perspectives differs.

H1b: Different types of German media's perspective selection varies, with specialized sports media more likely to adopt a "localizing" perspective.

2.3.2. From passive reception to active interpretation: the decoding mechanisms of audience emotion

The debate between passive audience reception and active interpretation remains important to media studies. The notion of "conditional belonging" proposed by some researchers highlights the complexity of audience interpretation: athletes are embraced as "one of us" in moments of victory but relegated to "the other" when defeated [16]. Studies on sports heroes further corroborate this pattern, showing that athletes are celebrated as "national heroes" at their peak yet may be abandoned when they encounter setbacks [2].

In Germany, there are three types of media consumers being identified: generalist, entertainment-driven, and value-driven, while "integrity" is consistently regarded as highly important across all groups [17]. Sentiment analyses of fan comments on the X platform indicate a pronounced polarization in German fans' emotional responses to athletes, with positive sentiments closely tied to athletic performance, but the negative sentiments are more often associated with perceived "authenticity" [18]. Importantly, this line of research suggests that audience reactions are not merely passive responses to media representations, but rather active interpretations and emotional projections grounded in individual values and expectations [18]. In addition, a cross-country analysis of four nations also shows that the German fans are more likely to transfer political values into the sporting world [19].

Initially, because of the ambiguous image of Fan Zhendong to the German audiences, they needed to depend on media reports to get to know him. On the one hand, with a possible saturation of media discourses, viewers can begin to conduct their own archival searches outside media and reveal intimate information, leading to debates on other issues that are not covered by the mainstream media. Conversely, his winning performances elicit multifaceted local affective reactions, possibly dividing the interpretations of the audience into awe and endangering the local athletes as outsiders. It is this dynamic process that offers a critical point of understanding how the process of passive reception is changing to active interpretation.

According to the analysis above, the hypotheses of this study are as follows:

H2a: During the first phase after the signing, the emotional tone of social media remarks is to a great extent dependent on the media coverage of that time period.

H2b: As the media coverage gathers and his fame increases, new issues not discussed by the media appear in the comments of the German audience, and the emotional orientation of these comments becomes diversified.

To conclude, although the literature offers insights into the comparative study of media and Peircean sports studies, it has three major limitations. To begin with, studies have mainly been done on the so-called challenger type of athletes like Yao Ming and Li Na. The focus on the new model of proactive outreach abroad, such as Fan Zhendong, is not sufficient. Second, the focus of the literature is to a large extent on the Anglo-American media; the systematic analysis of the German media is rather scanty. Third, empirical studies, which combine the process of encoding and decoding using quantitative correlation analysis, are few in terms of research design.

To fill these gaps, this paper will be a quantitative semiotic study of German media and audience discourse of the 2025/2026 Bundesliga season of Fan Zhendong. The research will make a new

empirical and theoretical contribution to the knowledge about the development of cross-cultural communication of Chinese sports stars.

3. Research design

3.1. Case selection and justification

This study selects Olympic table tennis champion Fan Zhendong as its case. First, distinct from the "challenger" model of predecessors like Yao Ming and Li Na, Fan Zhendong exemplifies a new "contributor" model. His participation as an excellent world-class athlete represents a shift towards "technical export" and "cultural exchange." Second, the case is highly influential. Following his signing, the German media represented him as "Table Tennis Caesar". The fan responses were also enthusiastic, which is why they provided an ideal empirical field for analysis. Third, the study covers a complete seasonal cycle (August 2025 – March 2026), encompassing key narrative phases from signing to post-season plans, which allows for a dynamic analysis of image construction.

3.2. Data collection and sampling

For media coverage, sources include Bild (Germany's highest-circulation newspaper), Süddeutsche Zeitung, Der Spiegel, the official website of the German Table Tennis Bundesliga (TTBL), and the official website of the Saarbrücken club. The study uses "Fan Zhendong" as the keyword to retrieve articles published between 1 August 2025 and 10 March 2026. The key temporal nodes include the signing announcement, press conference, debut, regular season matches, championship victory, and the announcement of plans for the following season. After manually excluding reprinted articles, duplicates, and brief mentions lacking substantive content, the study retained a total of 77 relevant reports.

For audience comments, the study collects German-language comments from posts published on X and Instagram by the official accounts of the above media outlets. The sampling focuses primarily on the two weeks during which comments were posted following each key event. In total, 315 comments were collected.

3.3. Analytical framework and procedures

Guided by the Peircean triadic model ("representamen–object–interpretant"), this study employs content analysis and sentiment analysis to semiotically link the media encoding with the audience decoding.

For content analysis, each media report was coded for basic metadata (outlet, date, type) and, crucially, for sign types per Peirce's typology: iconic (e.g., action photos), indexical (e.g., world rankings), and symbolic (e.g., "Table Tennis Caesar"). In addition, the study identified the attribution patterns in the reports and categorized them into dimensions such as individual effort, innate talent, and team interaction.

For the sentiment analysis, the study categorizes German fans' social media comments into different types. Drawing on Wang Ning et al.'s "three levels of interpretant" framework, the comments are further divided into four categories: emotional expression, technical discussion, behavioral intention, and cultural discourse. Each was assigned a valence (positive, neutral, or negative).

Lastly, in order to ensure coding reliability, 20% of the sample (15 media reports and 63 comments) was randomly selected for double coding. The resulting Holsti reliability coefficient is

0.87, exceeding the acceptable threshold for content analysis.

4. Research findings

4.1. Composite signification: media encoding through iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs

Table 1. Semiotic encoding strategies in german media coverage of Fan Zhendong

Sign	Object
"Olympiasieger" (Olympic champion),"Weltmeister" (world champion)	Outstanding Competitive Performance
"Pionier" (pioneer), "historischer Moment" (historical moment), "Boom" (boom)	Cultural Symbolism and Influence
"Freund" (friend), "enge Beziehung" (close bonds), "Fußstapfen" (foot print)	Interpersonal Relations and Local Integration
"Erster Titel" (first championship), "Pokalsieg" (cup victory), "Triple-Mission" (triple-mission)	Local Achievements and Contributions
"Zuschauerboom" (audience boom), "ausverkauft" (sold out), "chinesische Fans" (Chinese fans)	Market Appeal and Internationalization
"Zusatztribünen" (additional seating capacity), "Sicherheitspersonal" (securities), "Herausforderung" (challenge)	Impact on Club Operations

Analysis of the coverage, summarized in Table 1, reveals that German media employ a strategic combination of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. Indexical signs ("Olympiasieger," "Weltmeister") authenticate his elite athletic status; symbolic signs ("Pionier," "historischer Moment") construct cultural meaning; and iconic signs (action photos, interaction scenes) visualize his local integration. Taken together, these signs contribute to the construction of a composite image that combines the dual meanings of a "world-class athlete" and a "local contributor".

Based on a sample of 37 adopting a localizing perspective, 1 adopting a globalizing perspective, and 39 adopting a hybrid perspective, the distribution of perspectives deviates significantly from a uniform distribution ($\chi^2 = 35.64$, $p < 0.001$). From a Peircean perspective, the choice of "perspective" in reporting directly shapes the representamen—the perceptible form through the manifestation of signs. German media predominantly adopt a hybrid perspective (50.6%), simultaneously employing indexical signs (e.g., "world champion," "Olympic champion") to highlight his international identity and symbolic signs (e.g., positioning him within local clubs and teams) to construct the cultural metaphor of his belonging to the German league.

At the same time, a substantial proportion of reports employ a localizing perspective (48.1%). Although such coverage often features individual images of Fan Zhendong, the narrative emphasizes him as a symbolic figure who contributes to the club's performance and promotes the development of table tennis in Germany. This indicates that at the level of the representamen, German media construct Fan Zhendong as a composite sign that embodies both "world-class athlete" and "local contributor." Accordingly, H1a is supported.

For analysis, media were categorized as general-interest or specialized sports media. The results show that all 20 reports from general-interest newspapers adopt a hybrid perspective, and among the 57 reports from specialized sports media, there are 64.9% of reports that employed a localizing perspective and 33.3% of reports that employed a hybrid perspective. The findings indicate a significant difference in perspective selection across media types ($\chi^2 = 26.33$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that media type is an important factor shaping reporting strategies. Specifically, specialized sports media tend to incorporate Fan Zhendong into a local context through indexical signs (e.g., statistics, rankings, and performance records), while general-interest media are more likely to combine iconic signs (e.g., photographs) and symbolic signs (e.g., cultural labels) to convey both local relevance and international significance.

It should be noted that the sample size for general-interest media in this study is only one-third that of specialized sports media, showing that the general-interest outlets pay limited attention to Fan Zhendong. Although, as a world champion, Fan Zhendong has received considerable recognition within the sports domain, his coverage in German general-interest media remains comparatively sparse. Moreover, the study finds that none of the general-interest newspapers in this study maintains a dedicated table tennis section in their sports coverage. Instead, media attention tends to focus on sports with broader audiences and greater societal impact. From this perspective, general-interest media in Germany continue to privilege a domestically oriented framework in their overall sports reporting.

Accordingly, H1b is supported, although this conclusion should be interpreted in light of the relatively low level of attention paid to table tennis within general-interest media.

4.2. Dynamics of decoding: the topic spillover and the (non-) alignment of sentiment

As media coverage accumulates and visibility increases, new topics not addressed in media reports do emerge in audience comments, particularly in the initial stage (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of the consistency test for sentiment between reports and comments in the initial stage

Source Type	Positive	Non-Positive	Other/Uncoded	Total
Reports(source=1)	27	0	0	27
Comments(source=2)	39	15	1	55
Total	66	15	1	82
Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact p			0.0017	
Pearson χ^2			9.759	
p value			0.0076	
df			2	
Cramér's V			0.345	

This analysis reveals a significant initial divergence. While media reports were uniformly positive, audience comments, though still predominantly positive, contained a notable degree of negativity (see Table 2). Fisher's exact test yields $p = 0.0017$; the chi-square test shows $\chi^2 = 9.759$ ($p = 0.0076$); and Cramér's $V = 0.345$ suggests that the difference is not only statistically significant but also of moderate strength. Therefore, H2a is not fully supported.

This semi-autonomous affective production means that the audience discourse is not a mere echo of media framing but an active, re-articulative process from the outset.

Table 3. New issues emergence and cross-tabulation results across different communication stages

Stage	Issue Repeatedly Covered by Media	New Issues Not Covered by the Media	Total
Initial	39 (70.9%)	16 (29.1%)	55
Regular Season	42 (66.7%)	21 (33.3%)	63
Championship	52 (86.7%)	8 (13.3%)	60
After	55 (40.1%)	82 (59.9%)	137
	Pearson χ^2	44.045	
	p value	<0.001	
	df	3	
	Cramér's V	0.374	

Compared with the analysis of emotional orientation, the results provide a more direct test of H2a. In Table 3, there are significant differences across communication phases regarding whether new topics are introduced. Those aspects not covered by the media emerge in audience comments. The Pearson chi-square statistic is 44.045 ($p < 0.001$), with Cramér's $V = 0.374$, indicating not only a high level of statistical significance but also a moderate effect size. In terms of distribution, the proportion of new topics is 29.1% in the initial stage, which rises slightly to 33.3% during the regular season, then drops to 13.3% in the championship stage, and then increases markedly to 59.9% in the post-season stage, significantly exceeding the levels observed in other phases.

These findings reveal a stage-specific process of topic spillover. During the initial and regular seasons, although new topics begin to emerge, audience discussions remain largely centered on the themes already established by media coverage. In the championship phase, as the narrative becomes increasingly focused on the event of "winning the title", the range of discussion topics narrows further. However, in the post-season phase, as media agendas shift from immediate match reporting to transfers, retrospection, evaluation, and prospects, the comment space correspondingly expands beyond the boundaries of media coverage and generates a substantial number of new and derivative topics.

From the perspective of communication mechanisms, this pattern is theoretically coherent. As media exposure accumulates, audiences do not passively absorb an increasing volume of information. Instead, they developed more complex cognitive structures under the conditions of higher information density and greater contextual familiarity. The Increased visibility enables a broader range of participants to participate in the discussion, comprehend the background of events, and articulate their own interpretive frameworks. At the same time, the expansion of media coverage provides some more informational nodes that can be connected, reorganized, and extended. Thus, in later stages, the audience comments are more likely to generate new lines of discussion not yet fully addressed by the media.

4.3. Stage-modulated heterogeneity: the dispersion and re-differentiation of audience sentiment

4.3.1. Stage differences in dispersion and diversity indicators of comment sentiment

Table 4. Dispersion and diversity indicators of comment sentiment across different communication stages

Stage	n	Standard Deviation	Variance	Normalized Entropy	Blau index
Initial (2025.08-2025.09)	55	0.640	0.409	0.598	0.452
Regular Season (2025.10-2025.12)	63	0.447	0.200	0.326	0.228
Championship (2026.01)	60	0.334	0.112	0.204	0.126
After (2026.02-2026.03)	137	0.500	0.250	0.418	0.319

Note: Standard deviation and variance reflect the dispersion of sentiment coding. Higher normalized entropy and Blau index indicate greater diversity in the distribution of sentiment categories.

Table 5. Tests of variance

Levene Statistic	3.464
Levene p	0.0167
Bartlett	23.816
Bartlett p	<0.001

Regarding H2b, this analysis begins with studying how emotional expressions were exhibited in different phases. Table 4 illustrates how, despite differing phases, there is variance and standard deviation, +kd ent. This is even true for the Blau index. For example, in the initial phase, variation is at a standard deviation of 0.640, with variance at 0.409, and the corresponding normalized entropy is 0.598, and the Blau index is 0.452. This means that even though the comments were primarily positive in the beginning, there was a degree of differentiation. A prominent differentiation was observed at the beginning of the regular season, and this is even more evident during the championship phase. This indicates that most emotive comments were negated, thus showing a prominent convergence toward a singular prevailing emotional tone. This was also evident in the post-season phase as a result of the differentiation in sentiment, where most comments were centered toward the match results, and later pivoted during the analysis toward transfer window results, season recaps, and projections.

Deeper variance analysis, as shown in Table 5, supports this observation. The results of the Levene test show $p = 0.0167$, and the results of the Bartlett test show $p < 0.001$. Therefore, the differences in emotional dispersion during distinct phases are statistically significant. This means that if "emotional diversification" is defined as a non-dominative audience sentiment that is emotionally driven in different directions, and if this audience sentiment is divided emotionally and not in a singular sense, and if this audience sentiment is divided emotionally and not in a singular sense, then this hypothesis holds true.

This pattern shows that the focal points of the different stages of the process change in relation to the pattern of the communication process. Initially, the public opinion of the team is fluid, so people express themselves positively, with an observational tone, or with some reservation. When the

narrative is clearly dominant, it leads to the post regular season and championship phases, where the central focus of the discussion is most likely to be reflected by the dominant emotional tone of the entire public opinion. So, the post-season phase turns the focus from the central narrative to a wider variety of discussion topics, to a greater extent, the evaluative dimensions, greater divergence of expectations, and therefore greater variance in the different emotional tone.

Accordingly, the findings support a pattern of "stage-based diversification" in which a relative dispersion can be seen in the initial stage, a convergence in the initial phase, and a renewed dispersion in the post-season stage.

4.3.2. Cross-tabulation of stage and distribution of sentiment categories

Table 6. Distribution of comment sentiment and cross-tabulation results across different communication stages

Stage	Other/Uncoded	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Initial	1 (1.8%)	39 (70.9%)	11 (20.0%)	4 (7.3%)	55
Regular Season	0 (0.0%)	55 (87.3%)	6 (9.5%)	2 (3.2%)	63
Championship	0 (0.0%)	56 (93.3%)	3 (5.0%)	1 (1.7%)	60
After	0 (0.0%)	111 (81.0%)	21 (15.3%)	5 (3.6%)	137
Pearson χ^2				15.382	
p value				0.081	
df				9	
Cramér's V				0.128	
Monte Carlo Fisher p				0.0619	

After establishing differences in dispersion, this study further assesses whether the composition of emotional categories changes across communication stages. The results show that the Pearson chi-square statistic is 15.382 ($p = 0.081$), and the Monte Carlo Fisher test yields $p = 0.0619$. Although these figures do not reach the conventional 0.05 benchmark for statistical significance, they demonstrate a slightly statistically significant trend.

A quick look at the row percentages of Table 6 depicts a uniform trend. In the initial stage, in addition to positive sentiment, neutral, and negative expressions, the proportions are relatively higher. Then, in the regular season and championships, the positive sentiment expressed increases, while neutral and negative expressions drop. Finally, in the post-season phase, neutral and negative sentiments slightly increase. This overall distribution change is in line with the distribution change documented in Table 4, hence it lends support to H2b.

Stronger evidence for differences in dispersion versus marginal significance in categorical shifts suggests a crucial aspect: while the heterogeneity (concentration or spread) of emotional expression in encapsulated forms shows marked variation across stages, the proportional balance of sentiment categories (positive, neutral, negative) undergoes less significant change.

5. Conclusion

This study identifies a shift in the symbolic representation of Chinese sports stars abroad: from the "challenger" ethos of "breaking through" embodied by Yao Ming and Li Na, to the "contributor" orientation of exchange and mutual development represented by Fan Zhendong.

For predecessors like Yao and Li in a "challenger" narrative, where significance accrued gradually through their entry into and their success within the dominant system, they show a result-oriented trajectory. Fan Zhendong, however, entered as a top global sportsperson who was an excellent 'contributor' not through a narrative of struggle and breakthrough, but through a relational and process-oriented approach aimed at enhancing competitiveness and facilitating exchange.

Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, this study shows that the interpretant assumes a relatively autonomous and active position in the communication process. It sheds light on the process of unlimited semiosis as a convergence of media and audience: media narratives seed and expound meanings (e.g., from "world champion" to "cultural bridge") while audience discourse engages, reshapes, and contests those meanings. This complementary process positions cross-cultural sports communication as a dynamic negotiation process and highlights the significance of developing extensible symbols (those that can be continuously reinterpreted) to foster sustained engagement.

Thus, this study constructs a two-phase model which attempts to explain the development of overseas representation of Chinese sports stars from the "challenger" model (where meaning comes from breakthrough and achievement in foreign systems) to the "contributor" model (where meaning comes from the breakthrough and achievement in foreign systems).

Practically, this means, first, the need to go beyond the performance framing and move towards the interaction and relational and cultural dimensions. Second, it means the need to prepare for and use strategies that will allow active audience interpretation, which will foster participation. Third, it means to use evolving and dynamic narratives that will change along the communication continuum.

Apart from the above, this study also has further limitations. It is a single case study that is based on text, that is, media coverage and comments, so it lacks depth and cannot portray the full range of athletes' experiences. It also fails to provide insights that could be provided by an approach based on in-depth interviews. Additionally, while Peirce's framework is helpful for studying the construction of meaning, it has a bit of a gap when it comes to dealing with power and ideology. The researcher suggests that future studies combine semiotic analysis with critical discourse analysis.

Finally, this study notes the change in the global representation of Chinese sports stars from being viewed as challengers to contributors and emphasizes the importance of the audience in meaning construction. McCall suggests that from a semiotic approach, it is possible to argue that sports figures have a cultural role to play.

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