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National Narrative in China's Mainstream Media Coverage of Major International Sporting Events: Comparison of Beijing and Milan Winter Olympics

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Abstract. Against the background of globalization and the deep reconstruction of international communication patterns by developing media technology, international sports events have become the key field for a country to shape its image and compete for the right to speak internationally. Based on the agenda-setting theory, this study focuses on the topic of "presentation of national narrative" in domestic mainstream media reports, and makes a comparative study of the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 and the Olympic Winter Games Milano-Cortina 2026. Three domestic mainstream media, Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily and CMG News, are selected as the research objects, and 90 effective reports are coded and statistically analyzed by the content analysis method. It is found that in the Beijing Winter Olympics hosted domestically, the media generally adopted a highly centralized and strong agenda-setting strategy to construct a comprehensive national image with strong national strength and cultural self-confidence, while in Milano, which participated overseas, the strategy of agenda setting without overexertion was generally adopted. The data also shows that the length of reports, the degree of topic centralization and the proportion of topic length are positively correlated with the prominence of national narrative, and the distribution of media agenda directly guides the public's cognitive focus on national narrative.

Keywords: Agenda setting theory, Mainstream media, International sports events, National narrative, Winter Olympic Games

1. Introduction

Under the background of fierce media reform and media competition, the mainstream media can only shoulder the responsibility and mission entrusted by the times and effectively serve the overall situation of national development through systematic reform and efforts to stimulate innovation [1]. The acceleration of globalization and the iteration of media technology continue to reshape the international communication ecology. Large-scale international sports events are no longer limited to sports competitions, but have become the core carrier for the country to display its comprehensive strength, spread its cultural concepts and build its international image [2]. As the core force of the national communication system, China's mainstream media plays an important role in setting the

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agenda, guiding the value and narrating the country in the reporting of international sports events, and its reporting strategies directly affect the external communication and internal recognition of the national image [3].

As China's first Winter Olympics, the Beijing 2022 Games constituted a major international communication event in a home context. The 2026 Milano Winter Olympics represent an overseas participation scenario. These two contexts form a natural comparative field, providing a typical sample for examining differences in agenda-setting and national narrative among mainstream media. Based on the publicly reported data of Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily and CMG news official websites, this study empirically examines coverage intensity, thematic tendency, and narrative effects in the Beijing 2022 and Milano 2026 Winter Olympics. By collecting the basic information, content characteristics and core data of narrative effect, the paper uses content analysis method and comparative analysis method to clarify the differences of media agenda setting in dual fields, verify the correlation between agenda variables and narrative effect, and refine the laws of national narrative communication of transferable international sports events.

This research has both theoretical and practical significance: theoretically, it constructs a comparative research space for the two cases at home and abroad, breaks through the limitations of single-case studies, systematically explores the impact of field differences on media agenda-setting and narrative strategies, and enriches the application scenarios of agenda-setting theory in the field of international sports communication; practically, based on quantitative content analysis, it incorporates report length, topic centralization, and narrative width into a quantitative framework to objectively verify the communication effects of different agenda arrangements and narrative paths, thereby providing data support and practical references for China's mainstream media to optimize their coverage of international sports events and enhance the efficiency of national narrative communication.

2. Literature review

2.1. The relevance of major media events and the construction of national image

Major media events are an important carrier of national image communication, and their communication process and presentation effect will directly affect the audience's cognition, emotion and value judgment of national image, while the existing cognitive basis of national image will also affect the audience's interpretation and acceptance of major media events. For special major media events such as sports events, their influence on the national image of the host country can be attributed to the process of brand image transfer. The audience's cognition, emotion and evaluation of the event itself will naturally be transferred to the image cognition of the host country with the help of the associative network memory model and schema theory, which will become an important source of national image construction [4].

The choice of international communication strategies for major sports events, such as cultural display, value transmission, and cross-cultural empathy expression [5], will further strengthen or shape the audience's perception of the host country's image and become a key path for national image construction. For example, in the specific study of the Winter Olympics and the construction of national image, the academic circles pointed out that the international communication of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics should pay attention to both cultural display and value transmission [6, 7]. Some scholars also focus on the cross-cultural empathy communication of the Beijing Winter Olympics, and find that the international recognition of the national image can be effectively

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enhanced through strategies such as awakening shared emotions and innovating expression forms [5].

2.2. International major sports events communication and national image construction

In international communication, the differences in agenda setting of media in different countries have a significant impact on the presentation of the national image. The media's topic selection, reporting emphasis and attitude tendency will directly lead to the one-sided and differentiated characteristics of national image in other countries' media [8]. In the reports of the Winter Olympics, the agenda-setting of Western media presents the characteristics of "one body and many faces". Although they will pay attention to positive issues such as the host country's economic development and infrastructure construction, they often highlight negative issues due to ideological and cultural differences and even form subjective understandings and one-sided interpretations of the host country's national image through selective agenda-setting and framework construction [9, 10]. It can be seen that the international communication agenda setting of major sports events is deeply influenced by many non-objective factors and directly shapes the international image of the host country.

Existing research mainly focuses on single events or countries, with relatively few comparative analyses. At the same time, there is a lack of systematic research on the specific categories of agenda setting, its generation mechanisms, and its relationship with various dimensions of national image. This study takes the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the 2026 Milan Winter Olympics as comparative cases, based on the agenda-setting theory, and fill the research gap of the existing research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample selection

Three domestic mainstream media, Xinhua News Agency, People' s Daily and CMG News, are selected as national authoritative media, which are representative and oriented in the reporting of international sports events and can accurately reflect the communication strategies of China's mainstream media. Enter the keywords "Beijing Winter Olympics" and "Milan Winter Olympics" in the search engines of the official websites of three media, set the corresponding event cycle as the time range, and retrieve relevant news reports. 75 reports about the Beijing Winter Olympics and 75 reports about the Milan Winter Olympics were collected initially. After removing duplicates, video manuscripts and short messages of individual awards, 47 valid samples of the Beijing Winter Olympics and 43 valid samples of the Milan Winter Olympics were obtained, making a total of 90 valid reports.

3.2. Code book development

This research uses content analysis to explore the differences in media agenda setting in dual fields and to verify the relation between agenda variables and narrative effect. As the core research method, the objective information and subjective narrative of the report are coded, counted and analyzed according to the standardized coding system, so as to avoid subjective judgment deviation and ensure the objectivity of the research. This study combines agenda-setting theory and standardized content analysis procedures to construct a three-dimensional coding system with clear

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operational definitions and unified scoring rules, with all indicators quantifiable (as shown in Table 1). The specific categories are illustrated as follows.

Table 1. Design of coding book

Item	Codes	Elements	Codes
Media Source	1 Xinhua News Agency	Thematic Centralization	1 Marginalized
	2 People's Daily		2 Subordinate
	3 CMG News		3 Core
Release Time	1 Pre-Competition	Thematic Space Proportion	1 Less Than 30%
	2 During the Competition		2 30% To 60%
Article Genre	1 News Comments	Sports Power	1 No Mention
	2 Commentator Articles		2 Mild Mention
	3 Straight News		3 Moderate Mention
	4 Newsletters		4 High Prominence
	5 Feature Articles	National Strength	1 No Mention
Word Count	1 Less Than 1000 Words		2 Mild Mention
	2 1000 Words To 3000 Words		3 Moderate Mention
	3 More Than 3000 Words		4 High Prominence

The objective attributes of final samples include media source, release time, article genre, and word count, which were directly extracted from the headline, publication time, website label, and the original text's word count. The agenda-setting dimension reflects the focus and intensity of the media agenda, including thematic centralization and thematic space proportion, which are rated on a different level scale, with higher values representing stronger agenda weight. Narrative effect dimension evaluates the prominence of national image using a four-level scale. The sports power and national strength narratives are selected in the study.

4. Results

This study analyzes 90 valid news reports, 47 for Beijing 2022, 43 for Milano 2026, from Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and CMG News. The descriptive results are shown in Table 2. The descriptive statistical results reflect clear structural differences in media coverage between the Beijing 2022 and Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics. In terms of basic information distribution, Xinhua News Agency accounts for the highest proportion in both events, and the competition stage is dominated by during competition reporting. In terms of article genre, straight news reports account for an absolute majority, while commentaries and features account for a relatively small proportion, indicating that mainstream media prioritize objective, timely and factual information dissemination in Olympic coverage. Article length is mainly concentrated in the range of less than 1000 words and 1000–3000 words, reflecting a concise and efficient communication style adapted to the fast paced dissemination of sports news.

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics results

Item	Code	2022 Beijing	2026 Milano	Total
Media Source	1	23 (48.9%)	38 (88.4%)	61 (67.8%)
	2	17 (36.2%)	3 (7.0%)	20 (22.2%)
	3	7 (14.9%)	2 (4.7%)	9 (10.0%)
Release Time	1	3 (6.4%)	2 (4.7%)	5 (5.6%)
	2	26 (55.3%)	28 (65.1%)	54 (60.0%)
	3	18 (38.3%)	13 (30.2%)	31 (34.4%)
Article Genre	1	13 (27.7%)	5 (11.6%)	18 (20.0%)
	2	2 (4.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.2%)
	3	22 (46.8%)	22 (51.2%)	44 (48.9%)
	4	8 (17.0%)	7 (16.3%)	15 (16.7%)
	5	2 (4.3%)	9 (20.9%)	11 (12.2%)
Word Count	1	21 (44.7%)	18 (41.9%)	39 (43.3%)
	2	17 (36.2%)	22 (51.2%)	39 (43.3%)
	3	9 (19.1%)	3 (7.0%)	12 (13.3%)
Thematic Centralization	1	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.7%)	2 (2.2%)
	2	13 (27.7%)	18 (41.9%)	31 (34.4%)
	3	34 (72.3%)	23 (53.5%)	57 (63.3%)
Thematic Space Proportion	1	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.7%)	2 (2.2%)
	2	15 (31.9%)	19 (44.2%)	34 (37.8%)
	3	32 (68.1%)	22 (51.2%)	54 (60.0%)
Sports Power	1	6 (12.8%)	6 (14.0%)	12 (13.3%)
	2	14 (29.8%)	13 (30.2%)	17 (18.9%)
	3	12 (25.5%)	20 (46.5%)	32 (35.6%)
	4	15 (31.9%)	4 (9.3%)	19 (21.1%)
National Strength	1	15 (31.9%)	15 (34.9%)	30 (33.3%)
	2	16 (34.0%)	22 (51.2%)	38 (42.2%)
	3	13 (27.7%)	5 (11.6%)	18 (20.0%)
	4	3 (6.4%)	1 (2.3%)	4 (4.4%)

The results reveal a consistent pattern of stronger national discourse intensity in Beijing 2022 coverage and significantly restrained expression in Milano 2026 reports. In terms of sports power narrative, Beijing 2022 reports show a clear emphasis on high-level expression. High prominence is the most frequent category at 31.9%, and combined moderate and high mentions account for over half (57.4%) of all reports. In contrast, Milano 2026 reports are dominated by moderate mention

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(46.5%), with high prominence dropping to just 9.3%. This shows that the host-country context enables a more confident and assertive presentation of China's sports achievements, while overseas coverage adopts a more low-key, competition-focused tone. For the national strength narrative, the structural difference is even more pronounced. Beijing 2022 reports maintain a relatively balanced distribution across no mention, mild mention, and moderate mention (31.9%, 34.0%, and 27.7% respectively), reflecting a multi-layered approach to linking the Games with national development. Milano 2026 reports, however, are overwhelmingly concentrated in mild mention (51.2%) and no mention (34.9%), with moderate and high prominence together making up less than 15% of the total. This indicates that when China participates as a guest nation, mainstream media intentionally downplays national strength discourse to maintain a neutral and respectful stance toward the host country. Across both narratives, high prominence expressions remain low in Milano 2026 coverage, while Beijing 2022 reports are far more willing to use stronger national discourse. This consistent contrast confirms that the host/overseas context is a decisive factor shaping the intensity and structure of national narrative in mainstream media reporting.

To systematically explore the influence of agenda-setting elements on national narrative construction, all 90 valid samples of the two Winter Olympic Games were included in this empirical analysis. The Poisson regression model was adopted to test their internal correlations. The data presented low dispersion and good model fitness, which met the modeling criteria of Poisson regression and ensured the objectivity of statistical inference (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Regression results of thematic variables on narrative intensity

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	B	SE	Wald χ^2	p-value	IRR
Sports Power Narrative	Thematic Centralization	0.531	0.142	13.956	0.000***	1.699
	Thematic Proportion	0.485	0.151	10.347	0.001**	1.624
National Strength Narrative	Thematic Centralization	0.587	0.156	14.172	0.000***	1.799
	Thematic Proportion	0.512	0.163	9.875	0.002**	1.668

According to the full-sample regression results, both thematic centralization and thematic proportion exerted significantly positive effects on sports power narrative and national strength narrative. For sports power narrative, the coefficient of thematic centralization was 0.531 ($p < 0.001$), with an IRR of 1.699, indicating that each unit increase in thematic centralization raised narrative intensity by 69.9%. Thematic proportion also positively predicted narrative performance.

In terms of national strength narrative, thematic centralization showed a stronger predictive effect ($B=0.587$, $p<0.001$), with an IRR of 1.799. Highly centralized agenda layouts significantly improved the probability of national strength discourse presentation. In general, agenda-setting structure profoundly shaped national narrative construction throughout the two Winter Olympic samples. News reports with higher thematic centralization and larger thematic proportion tended to convey stronger national discourse. The findings validate the explanatory power of agenda-setting theory in international sports communication and demonstrate that mainstream media can optimize national narrative construction through deliberate agenda arrangement.

5. Discussion

In terms of agenda-setting indicators, thematic centralization and thematic space proportion are both at a high level in the full sample, and the proportion of core-level thematic centralization and more

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than 60% thematic space proportion is significantly higher than other levels. This shows that mainstream media tend to adopt a concentrated agenda layout in Olympic coverage, focusing on key themes and allocating sufficient space to enhance communication efficiency. There are obvious contextual differences between the two events: Beijing 2022 has a higher level of thematic centralization and larger thematic space proportion, because as the host country, the media need to build a strong and coherent agenda to highlight the event's significance and national image; Milano 2026 adopts a relatively moderate and decentralized agenda, in line with the low key and neutral communication orientation of participating countries.

In terms of narrative effect, the three-level coding distribution of sports power narrative and national strength narrative shows a significant gap between the two contexts. For sports power narrative, Beijing 2022 is dominated by high prominence and moderate mention, while Milano 2026 is dominated by moderate mention, with a sharp drop in high prominence expression. For the national strength narrative, Beijing 2022 presents a relatively balanced distribution among no mention, mild mention and moderate mention, while Milano 2026 is overwhelmingly concentrated in mild mention, with a higher no mention rate and very low high-level expression. This difference stems from the media's differentiated agenda strategy: in home-hosted events, the media appropriately strengthen national narrative to display comprehensive national strength and sports strength, enhance national pride and identity; in overseas events, the media take the initiative to weaken explicit national discourse, maintain objective and neutral reporting, respect the host country and the Olympic spirit, and avoid excessive nationalist expression. In terms of emotional tendency and tone, both events maintain positive or neutral attitudes, but Beijing 2022 has relatively stronger positive emotion to set off the atmosphere of the home court event, while Milano 2026 is calmer and more restrained, reflecting context adaptable emotional expression logic.

Poisson regression results show that both independent variables have a highly significant positive predictive effect on the two dependent variables. For sports power narrative, each level increase in thematic centralization increases the intensity of sports power narrative; larger space allocation significantly enhances narrative expression. For the national strength narrative, the occurrence probability of national strength discourse and thematic space proportion also stably promote narrative intensity. This result strongly supports the core view of agenda-setting theory. Media can not only guide the public's attention through topic selection, but also determine the prominence and intensity of the national narrative by controlling thematic centralization and space allocation. More theme-oriented expressions and higher layout proportion contribute to stronger agenda control, which can significantly amplify the expression of national discourse.

This study obtains important implications for national narrative construction. Firstly, context determines agenda strategy: home-hosted events are suitable for adopting a high centralization, high space agenda to appropriately strengthen national narrative and shape a confident and open national image; overseas events should adopt a moderate, restrained agenda to maintain neutrality and respect, and improve cross-cultural communication acceptance. At the same time, agenda structure directly affects narrative effect: scientific allocation of thematic centralization and space proportion can achieve precise and efficient national narrative output, avoiding both insufficient expression and excessive preaching.

6. Conclusion

There are significant contextual differences in the basic information distribution of media coverage. However, the agenda setting layout differs significantly between home and overseas events. The media source is relatively concentrated, during competition reporting is the most abundant, news is

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the dominant genre, and medium and short articles account for the majority, forming a stable and consistent coverage norm. Beijing 2022 adopts a highly centralized agenda with sufficient space allocation, while Milano 2026 adopts a relatively decentralized and restrained agenda, which is adapted to the communication positioning of host and participant countries, respectively. Sports power narrative and national strength narrative in Beijing 2022 are stronger, with higher proportions of moderate and high prominence; Milano 2026 is dominated by mild mention, with more narrative vacancy, reflecting a low key and implicit narrative strategy. What's more, Poisson regression confirms that thematic centralization and thematic space proportion have highly significant positive effects on sports power narrative and national strength narrative. The higher the agenda centralization and the larger the space proportion, the stronger the national narrative intensity, which verifies the applicability and explanatory power of agenda setting theory in international sports communication.

The limitation is that there are only three core official media, which limited the scope of the two Winter Olympics, and did not cover local media, new media platforms and other types of sports events. This study can't study and deal with video news, traditional news of pictures and texts and news of convergence in a unified way for the time being. Thus, future studies could expand from text processing to video and other integrated news processing, and expand the research scope of countries and media categories, so as to obtain more valuable conclusions.

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