

A Study on the Mechanism of Sports Idol "Persona" Construction in the Social Media Era

Jiayi Shen ^{1,*}, Jialin Shen ²

¹ School of Sports Science, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350000, China

² School of Physical Education and Health, Sanming University, Sanming 365004, China

*Corresponding author: 1531832465@qq.com

Abstract

This study explores the internal logic and operational mechanism of sports idol "persona" construction in the social media era. With the transformation of the media environment from traditional mass communication to social media, the image production of sports idols has evolved from a singular focus on "competitive achievements" to a dynamic process involving multiple stakeholders. The study finds that the "persona" of sports idols is not a one-way shaping process, but rather a three-dimensional collaborative system comprised of platform technology empowerment, athlete self-presentation, and fan meaning negotiation. A cyclical construction model encompassing visual, linguistic, and interactive symbols is constructed, and the risks of "internet celebrity" transformation and the dilemma of "fandom" formation under the logic of traffic are reflected upon, providing a theoretical reference for understanding modern sports communication and idol marketing.

Keywords

Social media; Sports idol; Persona construction; Dramaturgical theory; Participatory culture.

1. Introduction

In the era of traditional mass communication, the image of sports idols was mainly shaped by mainstream media such as television and newspapers. The path to fame for athletes followed a relatively fixed pattern: outstanding performance on the field was reported and built on the single dimension of "competitive achievements," shaping them into the image of "heroes" and "role models" [1]. During this period, the symbolic value of sports idols mainly came from the authoritative recognition of sports organizations—titles such as Olympic champions and world record holders constituted the core identifiers of their identity. However, the rise of social media has profoundly restructured this pattern. The popularity of platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Instagram has enabled athletes to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with their audience. As of March 2026, diver Quan Hongchan had more than 18 million followers on Douyin; top sports stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi, and LeBron James had a total of more than 1.8 billion followers on various social media platforms. These figures not only reflect the expansion of the influence of sports idols, but also show that this one-way construction model is gradually being broken. Athletes have begun to use platforms such as Weibo and Douyin to express themselves, and the production of the image of sports idols has thus shifted to a dynamic process involving multiple subjects.

In recent years, the concept of "persona" has gradually expanded from the entertainment industry to the sports field, becoming an important analytical tool for describing the construction of public figures' images. "Persona" is not only a simplified expression of an individual's personality traits, but also the result of the combined effects of media environment,

audience cognition, and cultural symbols [2]. However, existing research focuses on entertainment stars, and lacks a systematic analysis of the construction mechanism of "persona" for sports idols. When the accumulation logic of symbolic capital shifts from "competitive strength" to traffic logic, the identity recognition of sports idols faces an inherent tension. Some studies summarize this phenomenon as "athlete internet celebrityization" and point out that it "is like a double-edged sword, bringing positive effects while also causing many problems" [3]. Based on this, this paper explores the internal logic and operating path of the construction of "persona" for sports idols in the social media era from a mechanism perspective.

2. Evolution of Core Concepts and Theoretical Basis

2.1. Evolution of Research on Media Construction of Sports Idols

As an important carrier of sports communication, the image construction of sports idols has long been a focus of academic attention. Early research was mainly based on the mass communication paradigm, emphasizing the dominant role of traditional media in shaping the image of sports stars. Kong Deguo pointed out that sports stars are not only the main body of competition, but also symbolic resources in consumer culture [4], and their social significance is constantly amplified and reconstructed in the process of media communication. Such studies generally believe that the image construction of sports idols depends on the linear logic of "competitive achievements - media narrative - public recognition".

In specific terms, traditional media tend to shape sports idols through "heroic narratives" and "national discourse". For example, reports surrounding Olympic champions often highlight themes such as "fighting spirit" and "winning glory for the country" [5], thereby giving sports stars a high degree of moral symbolic significance. This construction path has obvious one-way communication characteristics, and the audience is more in a passive acceptance position [6]. However, with the evolution of the media environment, this model has gradually shown its limitations. On the one hand, traditional media portrays sports idols in a relatively singular way, making it difficult to present their multidimensional personalities; on the other hand, audience participation is limited, making it difficult to form a sustained interactive relationship. Therefore, the academic community has begun to pay attention to the transformation of the sports idol construction mechanism in the context of new media [7].

2.2. The Shift in Sports Communication Research in the Context of Social Media

With the rise of social media platforms, sports communication has gradually shifted from "media-centric" to "user-centric". Some scholars have pointed out through the analysis of sports stars' social media behavior that social media has not only expanded information dissemination channels, but also changed the way sports stars interact with the public, enabling them to strengthen their personal image through daily expressions [8, 9].

Foreign scholars have also systematically explored this transformation. Pegoraro's research on athletes' use of Twitter found that social media provides athletes with a "disintermediation" communication path, enabling them to communicate directly with fans, thereby enhancing the authenticity and intimacy of their image [10]. Information production and dissemination in the social media environment exhibit high participation and interactivity, which provides a new possible path for the construction of sports idol images. Meanwhile, some scholars have noted that social media dissemination has strengthened the "traffic logic," making content more emotional, fragmented, and entertaining [11].

Overall, existing research generally believes that social media has changed the structure of sports communication, transforming sports idols from "constructed objects" to "actively constructing subjects," but a systematic analysis of its specific operating mechanisms is still lacking.

2.3. Clarification of the Concept of "Persona/Character Design"

"Persona/character design" is short for "character setting." This concept originated from creative fields such as drama and animation. Some scholars believe that the concept of "persona/character design" originated from Hiroki Azuma's discussion of "light novels" [12], and later entered the fields of communication studies and sociology. Some scholars have pointed out that in online literature criticism, the new generation of readers habitually use the term "persona/character design" to refer to the character traits of characters in books. The semantics of "possibility" and "imagination" it encompasses are more in line with the production mechanism that emphasizes reader participation than the traditional term "character image." In other words, "persona/character design" is not an objective description of "what a person is," but a strategic construction of "why a person can be perceived to be."

Some studies have pointed out that "character design" as a visual symbol system originates from the mature ACG cultural industry and its database of settings continues to influence contemporary creations [13]. In the current context where commercial creation is difficult to separate from collective wisdom, character design has become a convenient tool—it is too convenient to borrow existing "character designs," which explains why "fan fiction" is so popular. Other studies have emphasized that "character design" has obvious "performative" and "strategic" characteristics [14].

In the environment of traffic competition, public figures often strengthen their specific image through conscious content selection and emotional expression, which makes "character design" not only a natural result but also a strategic product in media practice. From the perspective of sports science, we can define "character design" as: the public image that athletes consciously construct in the social media era, negotiate through multiple subjects, and present in a symbolic way. This definition emphasizes three core elements: first, "conscious construction"—the "persona" is not a natural expression but a strategic behavior; second, "multi-subject consultation"—the "persona" is not decided unilaterally by the athlete but is the product of interaction among the self, the media, and the fans; and third, "symbolic presentation"—the "persona" is perceived and disseminated through symbolic systems such as visual, linguistic, and interactive elements.

2.4. Theoretical Basis

In order to systematically analyze the construction mechanism of the "persona" of sports idols, this paper mainly introduces the following theoretical framework:

2.4.1. Dramatic Theory

In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", Goffman compares social life to a theatrical stage and proposes the core concepts of "front stage" and "back stage". The front stage is the place where actors perform and present themselves according to specific rules; the back stage is the private space where actors take off their masks and relax to prepare. Individuals manage the impressions of others in social interactions through "front stage performance" and "back stage preparation" [15]. In the context of social media, this theory is manifested as: sports idols construct a specific image through content selection and expression, thereby guiding public cognition. This theory provides a basis for explaining the performativity of the "persona" of sports idols and also reveals the possible tension of authenticity.

2.4.2. Participatory Culture Theory

Jenkins proposed that in the digital media environment, the audience is no longer a passive recipient, but a "participant" actively involved in content production. In the process of constructing the "persona" of sports idols, fans participate in image shaping through comments, reposts and secondary creations, making the "persona" show obvious collaborative production characteristics [16].

This theory has been fully verified in the field of sports. Contemporary sports fans actively construct sports narratives through user-generated content (UGC) and social comments, forming a dynamic creative ecosystem. Fans deeply participate in the construction and maintenance of the "persona" of sports idols through various means such as secondary creation, data practice, and meaning interpretation. This participatory culture not only gives fans unprecedented agency, but also brings controversy over "fan circle" culture—excessive intervention by fans may interfere with the normal training and life of athletes.

In summary, existing research has explored the issue of sports idols and public image from multiple perspectives, including sports communication, media theory, and fan culture. However, it still has the following shortcomings: First, the research subjects are biased towards entertainment stars, and there is a lack of systematic research in the field of sports. Second, the analytical perspective is mainly based on a single subject, lacking a multi-subject collaborative framework and a structured analysis of the "persona construction mechanism." Based on this, this paper starts from the three subjects of "platform—sports idol—fans," constructs a multi-subject collaborative analytical framework, and focuses on exploring the operational mechanism of sports idol "persona" construction in the social media era. The aim is to analyze, based on existing research, how sports idols' "personas" are constructed and what their mechanisms of action are.

3. Multidimensional Paths to Constructing the "Persona" of Sports Idols in the Social Media Era

In the social media environment, the "persona" of sports idols is not solely created by individual athletes, nor is it solely created by the media. Instead, it is a dynamic equilibrium system woven together by the platform's technological empowerment, the athlete's self-presentation, and the meaningful negotiation among fans.

3.1. Platform Entities: Symbolic Binding of Technological Affordability and Algorithmic Logic

3.1.1. The Intervention of MCN Agencies and the "Industrialized Production" of "Persona"

As the commercial value of sports idols rises, MCN agencies have begun to systematically intervene in athletes' social media operations. These agencies undertake functions such as content planning, platform distribution, business connections, and crisis public relations, shifting the construction of the "persona" from "natural growth" to "industrialized production." Taking Zheng Qinwen as an example, his team quickly planned a series of content after his Australian Open victory: short video clips of the winning moment, excerpts from post-match interviews, cover shoots for fashion magazines, and the official announcements of brand endorsements—the timing of these releases, platform selections, and discourse strategies all demonstrate a high degree of strategy, reflecting the characteristics of professional team operation.

3.1.2. The Shaping of "Persona" by Platform Logic

The technological characteristics and user ecosystems of different social media platforms have a differentiated impact on how sports idols present their "personas." Research shows that Weibo is suitable for text and topic discussions, serving as the main platform for setting the "trending topics" agenda; Douyin/TikTok is suitable for visual, emotional, and fragmented content, making it a key channel for "going viral"; Instagram falls somewhere in between, suitable for refined visual presentation.

These differences in platform logic require athletes to adopt "platform-adapted" content strategies. The same content might need to be edited into a 15-second emotional climax on

Douyin, accompanied by hashtags and lengthy explanations on Weibo, and require high-quality visual presentation on Instagram. While this "multi-platform distribution" strategy expands reach, it also increases the burden of content production and the difficulty of maintaining a consistent "persona."

Platforms are not only channels for dissemination but also crucial nodes in the construction of "personas." They predetermine the boundaries and underlying tone of idol presentation through technological logic [17, 18]. Algorithm Recommendation and Tagging: The Initial Construction of a "Persona" Social media algorithms tend to simplify complex individual characteristics into highly recognizable "tags." For example, the traffic allocation mechanisms of Douyin and Xiaohongshu capture the most "viral" traits of athletes and push them in a saturated manner. At the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, 14-year-old Quan Hongchan won the gold medal with an astonishing performance of three perfect scores out of five dives, breaking historical records with a total score of 466.20. Her signature dive, the 207C (back 3½ somersaults tuck), is almost impossible to land without a splash, earning it the nickname "the disappearing splash technique." The algorithm seized on the stark contrast between her "disappearing splash technique" on the field and her off-field persona of "spicy snacks, dolls, and dialect," setting her "persona" as a "genius yet innocent girl next door." Under this logic, the platform, through continuous traffic compensation, rapidly polarizes this tag, completing the initial symbolization of the "persona."

3.2. Sports Idol Subjects: Impression Management and the Crossing of "Front/Backstage" from the Perspective of Dramatic Theory

Performance-based "persona" is the most basic and core type of "persona" for sports idols. It uses the athlete's competitive performance as the core symbol, and constructs images such as "strong," "champion," and "big heart" through the visual presentation of the performance on the field. The reason why this type of "persona" has a fundamental status is that competitive performance is the fundamental basis for distinguishing sports idols from entertainment stars—without outstanding performance on the field, the "idol" identity loses its legitimacy [19].

Athletes, as the core agents in the construction of "persona," have used social media to achieve a transformation from "passive shaping" to "active expression" of identity [20]. Direct expression and production of authenticity through "disintermediation" In the era of traditional media, the backstage of athletes was tightly concealed. Social media, however, gives athletes the power to bypass professional public relations and directly face the audience. After the 2024 Paris Olympics, swimmer Pan Zhanle showed a sense of authenticity on social media. He deleted his fan group, spoke frankly in interviews, and shared his "ordinary" life on Weibo. From a dramaturgical perspective, this behavior essentially means consciously pushing his "backstage" persona to the "front stage." This "refusal to perform" itself becomes a high-level performance strategy, constructing a "sober, hardcore, and unconventional" new generation idol persona. He engages in emotional labor through replying to comments, appearing unexpectedly in supertopics, and sharing training vlogs. This interactive response to fans' emotional labor bridges the power gap between sports idols and their audience. Athletes are no longer static symbols in newspapers, but rather "quasi-relatives" or "digital confidants" with warm emotions. This emotional connection is the core fulcrum for the persona to maintain its longevity. It utilizes the blurring of the boundaries between "front stage" and "backstage," using the athlete's off-field personality traits—humor, cuteness, frankness, academic excellence, etc.—as construction material to create a contrast with their on-field image.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the core mechanism of this contrasting personality persona is the front-stage transformation of the backstage. In the era of traditional media, athletes' private personalities were intentionally concealed, and the public could only see the "heroes on

the field." In the era of social media, athletes bring their daily lives, emotional states, and personal expressions to the forefront through vlogs, live broadcasts, and interactive comments, thereby creating a sense of "authenticity" and "accessibility."

3.3. Fans as the Main Subject: Active Participants in Participatory Culture

In the era of social media, fans are no longer passive recipients of "personas," but rather "co-producers" who are deeply involved in repairing, strengthening, and even rewriting "personas." On the one hand, some studies have pointed out that fans are deeply involved in the construction and maintenance of CP "personas" through "narrative translation," "moralization," and strengthening "identity recognition" [21]. This participatory culture has given fans unprecedented agency, but it has also brought controversy—when fans' "imagination" does not match the athletes' real relationship, it may trigger a public opinion crisis. Zheng Qinwen's fans, by digging into her domineering English interviews on the court, her powerful fashion photos, and combining them with her "confident and open" post-match remarks, spontaneously launched a "queen power" narrative on social media platforms. Through "memes" and semantic reshaping, fans have elevated Zheng Qinwen from a tennis player to a cultural totem of contemporary women's "ambition and power."

On the other hand, through organized comment control, anti-blacklisting, and ranking activities, fans, through data practices and "fan circle" protection mechanisms, have built a "digital defense wall" for the "persona." When an athlete's "persona" is questioned, the fan group will use a unified discourse template to correct its meaning. This participatory culture gives the "persona" strong resilience, but it also causes the "persona" to gradually detach from the athlete and become a virtual aggregate of the fan group's emotional projection.

3.4. Synergy and Tension of the Tripartite Interaction

From the perspective of functional division of labor: the athlete is the "origin" of the "persona"—all symbols ultimately point to the athlete himself, and his competitive achievements, personality traits, and behavior constitute the material basis of the "persona"; the media/capital is the "amplifier" of the "persona"—through content planning, platform distribution, and trending topics, the athlete's symbols are amplified and pushed to a wider audience; fans are the "guardians" and "secondary creators" of the "persona"—through data practices, meaning interpretation, and secondary creation, they inject emotional energy into the "persona" and extend its life cycle. The three main actors—athletes, platforms, and fans—form a relationship of "cooperation and tension" in the construction of the "persona."

On the one hand, the cooperation mechanism is reflected in the fact that athletes provide the original materials, platforms package and amplify them, and fans carry out secondary dissemination and emotional injection. The three form a closed loop of "production-dissemination-consumption-reproduction," jointly promoting the establishment and maintenance of the "persona." On the other hand, the tension mechanism is reflected in the fact that athletes want to maintain "authenticity," platforms pursue "maximization of commercial value," and fans expect "emotional satisfaction"—the demands of the three are not always consistent. When the demands of one party overwhelm the others, the "persona" may become unbalanced or even collapse.

This "three-subject" framework transcends the traditional binary model of "sender-receiver." Some scholars, starting from the theory of symbolic capital, point out that the generation of sports star "personas" is "the externalization of social labels, the product of the mutual construction of ethical values and consumption symbols in a specific period." In other words, the "persona" cannot be completely controlled by any single subject, but is the result of the game, negotiation, and co-construction of multiple forces in a specific social context [19].

Understanding the logic of this game is key to revealing the mechanism of "persona" construction.

4. The Operational Mechanism of Sports Idol "Persona" Construction

Based on multi-subject interaction, the construction of a sports idol's "persona" exhibits a systematic operational mechanism.

4.1. Visual Symbol System: Body, Scene, and Image

First, visual symbols are the most intuitive and communicative type of symbol in "persona" construction. In the social media environment dominated by short videos, the importance of visual symbols is further amplified. Body symbols are the core visual symbols that distinguish sports idols from entertainment stars. An athlete's body is both the carrier of competitive performance and the material for "persona" construction. An athlete's muscle lines, injury marks, and technical movements—these body symbols, through repeated presentation in short videos, are endowed with cultural significance that transcends the biological level. Taking Su Bingtian as an example, slow-motion replays of his starting technique have gained massive dissemination on platforms like Douyin, with labels such as "scientific training" and "Asian speed" subsequently attached to his body symbols.

Second, scene symbols involve the location and context in which the athlete appears. The competition arena is the core "front stage" scene, carrying the symbolic meaning of competitive spirit; the training ground is a "semi-backstage" scene, showcasing "sweat" and "struggle"; everyday scenes such as family and streets are products of "backstage becoming front stage," serving to create a sense of "realism."

Third, visual symbols include the editing style, filter selection, and background music of short videos. These seemingly "formal" elements actually profoundly influence the perception of the "persona"—fast-paced editing conveys "excitement," warm filters enhance the feeling of "healing," and specific background music becomes the "auditory trademark" of the "persona."

4.2. Linguistic Symbol System: Labels, Discourse, and Narrative

Labeling is the core strategy for the dissemination of "personas" in the social media era. Trending topics, internet memes, keywords, and other linguistic symbols concisely summarize the core characteristics of a "persona." Labels like "Big Heart," "Genius Girl," and "National Table Tennis Team Dragon" become solidified through repeated dissemination, serving as a quick way for the public to perceive a "persona."

Narrative strategies are manifested in the "story-based" construction of a "persona." Existing research summarizes three main narrative types: growth narratives, comeback narratives, and emotional narratives. These narratives inject a temporal dimension and emotional depth into the "persona," making it transcend static "labels" and become dynamic "stories." Chen Long's retirement narrative—"Accepting the ordinary end of an athletic career is a choice that requires more courage than winning a championship"—resonated widely precisely because it broke the success narrative of "always having to win," offering another way of understanding "growth."

4.3. Interactive Symbols: Comments, Live Streaming, and Co-creation

Interactive symbols are a unique type of symbol that distinguishes social media from traditional media. Interactions in the comments section, impromptu conversations during live streams, and fan-created content that picks up on jokes—these interactive behaviors themselves become dynamic material for constructing a "persona."

Athletes' interactions with fans in the comments section are often seen as a revelation of their "true personality," interpreted by fans as "evidence" of their "persona." Impromptu performances during live streams, due to their "unedited" nature, are labeled as "authentic."

However, this "authenticity" is itself a strategic performance—athletes and their teams are also prepared and controlled in their words and actions during the live stream. The interaction between fan-created content and the official "persona" forms an "intertextual" symbolic production. Official content provides material for fans, while fan-created content, in turn, enriches the meaning of the official "persona." This "co-creation" model is the core characteristic that distinguishes "persona" construction from traditional "image shaping."

4.4. Collaborative Construction Mechanism: A Multi-Subject Circular System

The "persona" of sports idols exhibits a multi-subject collaborative circular structure: "Content Production → Platform Distribution → Fan Interaction → Content Reproduction → Idol Adjustment." Taking Gu Ailing's interaction with fans as an example, the logic is: "Gu Ailing releases training videos → Platform algorithm recommends to followed users → Fans like, comment, and create secondary content → Idol observes data feedback → Adjusts subsequent content production strategies." This cycle reflects typical mediatization characteristics, meaning that individual behavior is jointly shaped by platform structure, audience behavior, and social interaction.

Therefore, it is evident that the "persona" is not only the result of the idol's self-presentation but also a product of the combined action of the platform and fans.

5. Reflections on Problems and Real-World Dilemmas

While social media offers sports idols unprecedented autonomy and interactivity, its development is also accompanied by multiple risks.

On the one hand, platform algorithms favor entertaining and easily disseminated content, potentially weakening the core value of competitive sports. Olympic content on some short video platforms mainly consists of entertaining and edited clips, with low exposure for in-depth training and competition analysis. This "traffic logic" may gradually shift idol images towards "internet celebrity" personas, creating tension with the professionalism of sports. Furthermore, with capital intervention, "persona" construction is increasingly linked to commercial interests. Advertising endorsements, brand collaborations, and social media rankings strengthen the commercial value of idols, leading to the risks of content homogenization and a shift in value orientation. Some Olympic stars primarily post endorsement content on short video platforms, while training or competition performance content decreases, resulting in a decline in audience perception of their competitive abilities.

On the other hand, increased fan autonomy may lead to negative effects such as excessive support, public opinion conflict, interference with training and daily life, and even illegal activities by some "sasaeng fans."

6. Conclusions and Outlook

This paper systematically analyzes the construction mechanism of sports idol "persona" in the social media era from a multi-stakeholder collaborative perspective. The main conclusions are as follows:

First, the "persona" of sports idols is no longer shaped by a single media, but is the result of the combined effects of multiple stakeholders: platforms, idols, and fans.

Second, social media algorithms determine the priority of content dissemination, influencing the labeling and dissemination path of "persona." Finally, the core operating mechanism—visual, linguistic, and interactive feedback—forms a multi-stakeholder cyclical system, enabling dynamic adjustment of the "persona."

Existing research also has significant shortcomings. At the theoretical level, it largely borrows from communication and sociological theories, lacking theoretical contributions from sports science itself—how to construct a localized analytical framework based on "physical practice," "competition," and "the characteristics of sports" remains an unsolved problem. At the methodological level, it relies heavily on qualitative case studies, lacking large-sample quantitative and cross-cultural comparisons—there is insufficient research on the differences between different sports. At the subject level, it focuses primarily on top stars, with insufficient attention paid to marginalized groups such as ordinary athletes, retired athletes, and Paralympic athletes.

Based on the above analysis, future research can be expanded in the following directions: Constructing an analytical framework from a sports science perspective—incorporating "physical practice," "competition," and "sport characteristics" as core variables into the analysis; expanding cross-cultural and cross-sport comparative research—the similarities and differences in the "persona" construction mechanisms of sports idols in China and abroad, and the differentiated logic of "persona" construction in different sports; deepening research on coping with "persona" risks—the institutionalized path of athlete "persona" management, and research on countermeasures for the governance of sports fandoms.

In summary, the construction of sports idol "personas" in the social media era is a highly complex and dynamic socio-technological-cultural system. Its mechanism analysis has significant theoretical and practical value for understanding modern sports communication, fan culture, and idol marketing.

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