

The Construction and Dissemination of the Media Image of Sports Celebrities from the Domain Theory —Taking the Media Image of Gu Ailing Eileen on Weibo as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, with the continuous innovation of information communication technology, sports celebrities, as the elites of the celebrity group, not only have sports achievements, but also gain a high degree of recognition in the media. At the same time, sports celebrities can freely switch between different domains, and use social media to construct and spread their own media images. The dissemination of these media images can not only help them gain higher exposure, but also help them master the laws of capital operation in the consumption era, promote sports, as well as activate sports culture. Based on Bourdieu's domain theory, this research draws on the theoretical model framework of trinity of domain, capital, and habitus to analyse the construction of media images of sports stars in cross-field communication, and analyses the location of the fields that they participate in. Meanwhile, this research makes a structural discussion on the tension between the position of the sports stars and the relationship among the action subjects. The research mainly focuses on the media image of the sports celebrity—Gu Ailing Eileen, and then proposes that the media images of sports celebrities are inextricably linked with the relationship between the subjects in the domain, the habitus of the sports industry, and the symbolic capital they possess. But it is worth noting that although the cross-border communication of sports stars has made their media images widely promoted and injected new vitality into sports culture, it has also caused conflicts between the system and the market, excessive competition in the industry, and excessive fans, entertainment generalization and other issues. These problems hinder the construction of the media image of sports stars and the development of sports culture. Therefore, it is urgent to solve the current problems from the aspects of personal construction, legal revision, and team operation. Only by adhering to the principle of mutual respect can the country, sports celebrities and social capital continuously improve the value and function of celebrity media image construction.

Keywords: Sports celebrity, The domain theory, media image, Gu Ailing Eileen

1. INTRODUCTION

In the West, the term “celebrity” can be tracked back to the study of the stars before it entered the world of the theoretical. With the continuous development and change of the media technology, the close connection between the celebrity, mass media and democracy has attracted more and more attention from the scholars from the walks of the life. It is worth noting that in the social status classification of the celebrity, athletes are at the top and belong to the elite of the celebrity group, who have a lot of wealth and high social status. The special social status of the sports celebrities is not only owing to their sports

achievements, but they also have high media recognition, allowing them to freely switch roles between entertainment and sports. Furthermore, based on the symbolization of the consumption era and the law of the capital operation, the symbolic capital value possessed by sports celebrities expands their symbols as athletes, and at the same time greatly promotes the positive flow of the society.

Taking the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as an example, the sports celebrities are a complex combination in the Winter Olympics, including market strategies, social services, nation symbols and

collectivism. In the environment, the Winter Olympics provided sports celebrities with stereotypes of success, ability and beauty. Not only are they a perfect moral hero and symbol of national culture, but they are also role models and fashion characters for younger audiences to emulate. Among them, the most discussed sports celebrity is freestyle skier Gu Ailing Eileen—one of the Chinese Americans who crossed China and US., who operating freely between the two cultures and life systems and is proud of her heritage as well as growing experience [1]. Gu Ailing Eileen, 18, was born in San Francisco, her father is American, and her mother is Chinese. She looks like a foreigner but speaks authentic Chinese. On the eve of the Winter Olympics, Ailing Eileen caused a very high degree of discussion and topic on the Internet, within the issue of her citizenship has been a hot topic of public discussion. Throughout Ailing Eileen's growth process, although she lived in the US. for mostly of her childhood and she also represented the US. In the freestyle skiing World Cup competition. However, in June 2019, 15-year-old Gu Ailing Eileen announced through her personal social media account that she had officially converted to Chinese nationality. She said she hopes that during the Winter Olympics, she could encourage millions of young people in China to help promote the ice-snow sports [2]. The audience continuing to deepen their love for Ailing Eileen through social media platforms, among which many Chinese parents hope that their kids can follow Ailing Eileen as an example, learn to master various hobbies and interests, as well as effectively complete their studies. With high expectations and blessings, Gu Ailing Eileen won three Olympic medals for China through her own efforts, which was highly praised by Chinese audience.

During the Winter Olympics, the Weibo platform has been also witnessed the success of the Gu Ailing Eileen along the way. In a broad sense, Weibo is a kind of micro-blog, which first proposed by Evan Williams, but compared to the blog, Weibo is more convenient to operate, as well as content more concise [3]. Weibo in a narrow sense refers to Sina Weibo, a domestic online media platform based on user relationships. Sina Weibo, which allows user to post original contents on the platform, retweet other user's contents and comments, has been a popular representative of mass social media in recent years [4]. According to the data of Weibo in 2021, the monthly active user of the Weibo will reach 530 million [5]. Among them, the structure of Weibo user is showing a trend of younger generation. It has penetrated the life of young people from multiple dimensions of food, consumption, and the like. As a typical young user, Gu Ailing Eileen has more than 6 million followers on Weibo platform. In the eight years since she registered for Weibo, Ailing Eileen has been posting tweets more than 700 on her own account, one every four days on average [6]. During the competition, Gu Ailing Eileen contracted for more than 30 hot searches on Weibo, such

as #Gu Ailing Eileen gold medal, #Gu Ailing Eileen is the world's highest difficulty, #Congratulations to Gu Ailing Eileen. Taking Ailing Eileen's winning the first gold medal in the women's freestyle skiing platform for China as an example, she posted a video of "the happiest second of life" on Weibo, which has been viewed by more than 3 million people, as well as 83 related topics have been appeared on Weibo hot search list. It can be said that Gu Ailing Eileen used Weibo platform to let more Chinese audiences know her and like her. On Weibo, Ailing Eileen is not only an athlete, but also a role model for Chinese sports celebrities [7].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In domain theory, "field" originally derived from the category of physics, and then, the "field" was introduced into the field of psychology by German psychologist Lewin, who put forward into the idea that "field is the living space" [8]. Although the concept of domain is simple, it has gradually penetrated other disciplines, and have emerged new concepts like news field, mass communication field and media field. The sociologist Durkheim combined society and domain, as well as proposed three necessary factors in the composition of domain, capital, and habitus of social field [9]. In the 1990s, Bourdieu effectively connected the macroscopic structural level and the microscopic organizational behaviour level in domain theory through social practice activities, injecting a new theoretical perspective into domain research. Subsequently, Bourdieu and Wacquant clearly defined the media domain in the *Practice and Reflection: A Guide to the Sociology of Reflection* as "a network or a structure in which there are objective relations between various positions" [10]. Thus, Bourdieu, as a master of the development of domain theory, provides a new theoretical direction for the construction of online public opinion, which is helpful for researchers to discover the uniqueness of field from the media situation, and to explain the deep relationship between domain theory and media development. Based on this, the scholar Leng proposed not only to examine the external formation of the media domain, but also to consider the internal configuration of the media domain [11]. It further shows that actors who carry out their own struggles in the media field need to rely on the competition of cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital to realize the practical signification of discourse communication. Secondly, the scholar Zhao used the domain theory to analyse the reasons for the collapse of the "persona" of Chinese stars and how to establish a stable "persona" under the operation of the field [12]. In other words, the researcher began to pay attention to the excellent interaction as well as discourse conflict between fans and stars, reshaping the media environment with capital within the field. Finally, the domain theory provides directional guidance for the development of the sports sociology. From the

perspective of the athlete development, the French scholar put forward that the athletes are social individuals composed of economic capital and cultural capital. In other words, he discusses the relationship between sport and capital from the perspective of sports celebrity's participation [13]. Duo to the fact that athletes' background will affect their choice of sports, since, to a certain extent, it is also a sports habitus. To sum up, the field not only provides discourse power and identity perception with the sports celebrities, but also can create a kind of social identity power by the sports celebrities, which is a dominant power that has an impact on the real society.

The study of celebrity culture can be traced back to the study of stars. In 1940s, the American scholar Klapp named this emerging group (including movies stars, athletes, entertainers...) "popular heroes" [14]. Sociologist Mills, in his book *The Power Elite*, defines celebrities as "names of the people who need no further explanation...whatever they do have exposure value... they are the raw material of mass media" [15]. With the advent of the golden age of film, the Frankfurt School scholar Lowenthal predicted that American society will usher in an important change—the public's worship of celebrities will change from "production idols" to "consumer idols" [16]. Movies and celebrities, as representatives of consumer culture, have gradually become an inevitable part of people's daily life. The British scholar Rojek, as one of the important contributors to the study of celebrity culture, pointed out that "Celebrity" in the English context refers to people who gain fame quickly, and divided celebrities into ascribed celebrity, achieved celebrity and attributed celebrity, which provides a pioneering way for the study of the celebrity culture [17]. In view of the multiplicity of the celebrity, different scholars have different definitions of celebrity culture. Some scholars define celebrity culture as "a culture in which fame is central" [18], further emphasizing the commercial capital attributes of celebrity culture, and regard celebrity culture as a culture that is sold as a commodity. Some scholars have compared celebrity culture to religion, and the idol worship of fans to religious worship [19]. Until entering the 21st century, scholars Driessens and Olivierde defined media culture as a "collection of meaning-making activities with celebrities as the main source of meaning" [20]. It is not only about celebrities themselves, but also includes a series of issues such as the entire industry that produces celebrities, various peripheral products of celebrities and the audience's reaction to celebrities. With the advancement of digital media, scholar Bell pointed out that the criteria for judging celebrity culture no longer depend on talent, ability, and achievement, but are linked social media traffic [21]. The era of celebrity culture created by mass media is over. Now, audiences have the initiative to create and enjoy the satisfaction brought by network culture. Among them,

the most typical is the performance of sports stars active on the social media. The scholar Yin discussed the symbolic transmission of sports stars in entertainment programs [22]. He believes that the image of a sports star is an elite star image after the mass media has selected and processed the athletes themselves or related events. The media image of sports celebrities is not their own image characteristics, but a symbolic representation through media reprocessing and audience selection. As a typical cultural symbol, the issue of media construction of sports celebrities has become a hot social topic.

Sports celebrities are inseparable from the development of modern media technology. Regarding the research on sports celebrities, majority of scholars have examined the reasons why sports stars have become the core of celebrity culture from the perspective of sociology, and jointly emphasized the promoting role of the media. In its monograph, Smart analyses the economic and cultural factors of the popularity of British and American sports stars [23] and presents the cultural communication and cross-border activities of sports celebrities in social media in the form of cases. He took Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Tiger Woods as research objects, selected sports celebrities of different sports, and studied the influence of their age, class, and race on the career development of sports stars. As can be seen from his research, cultural, political, and technological force conspire to shape the celebrity personalities, which are achieved by carefully cultivating their authenticity. Whereas, once this natural training channel is sculpted by the media, it would cover up the true talents of some sports celebrities, and their commercial characteristics have also changed the meaning of sports to people. Consequently, how to construct the media image of sports celebrities has become an urgent problem for current researchers. The scholar Di discussed the concept of media image of sports stars in detail, as well as he agreed with the social value created by sports celebrities [24]. Specifically, the media image of sports celebrities has the social role of cultural exchange; contribute to promoting the development of mass sports; stimulate the development of the national sports economy; has an important role model for the growth of young people; and is conducive to shaping the country's excellent image. Therefore, the activities of sports celebrities in the media domain should achieve the unity of the overall image and the individual image, consider the rapid development of the public and their own interests, and play the guiding role of their media image. With the increasing ability of sports stars to use social media in recent years, Weibo has become one of the main platforms for them to shape their media image. Scholars Yu and Yang not only analysed the rise of sports microblogs, but also explored the development mode and communication characteristics of sports celebrities [25]. Through the research, Weibo platforms are used to disseminating news about popular athletes, thereby

attracting more reader groups. At the same time, these athletes also hope to establish their own media image through the packaging of Weibo platform. With the general return of the public discourse right, sports communication has derived huge economic value and marketing potential on the Weibo platform. To adapt to the continuous expansion of social effects, sports celebrities will continue to tap their own social potential, thereby creating social energy beyond awareness and ideas for the audience. Similarly, for sports celebrities, whether the transaction environment between them and the microblog field is mutually linked and inclusive, and whether the relationship between the subjects of each field is orderly and fair, determines their image construction on the media platform.

These studies and theories can help to understand some background information and research direction in advance, but there are still some research gaps. This research argues that although these massive literatures studies focus on sports celebrities to discuss their image generation and dissemination, there are very few studies to discuss their media image construction from domain theory. Besides, these literatures pay too much attention to the external description of the image of sports celebrities, and rarely analyses the generation path and value meaning of their media image construction in depth. Finally, in terms of case selection, most of these literatures are discussed in multiple cases, but it is worth noting that it is difficult to analyse the specific characteristics of celebrity media images in depth with multiple scattered cases. To achieve the intended purpose of this study and to allow the benefits of the study to be realized. This research would take Gu Ailing Eileen's performance on Weibo as an example to explore how she constructs and disseminates her own image from the perspective of the field. At the same time, this research mainly adopts the observation method, focusing on the sports star Gu Ailing Eileen on Weibo, starting with a total of 24 Weibo posts from 2022.01.02 to 2022.02.22, and combining Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus, to analyse the media image of sports celebrities under the guidance of mass media. Through the research, it is expected that it can give a certain guiding role for sports stars in practical life, to seek a broader space for personal symbol value-added, as well as provide a certain theoretical basis for the development of media culture, expand the influence of celebrities and media culture on contemporary society.

3. DISCUSSION

In the domain theory, there are three important components that constitute the main part of the field. Taking the media domain as an example, first, the domain element is an indispensable part of it, which is a social network composed of the social attributes of the actors [26]. Secondly, under the numerous and intertwined

fields, the habitual element affects the position of the actor from the time dimension and guides the actor's practical activities in the domain from the individual consciousness and the group subconscious. Finally, the capital element determines the location of field actors from the spatial dimension. The type and quantity of capital acquired by the actor also constrain the formation of the actor's behaviour and habitus. Therefore, the emergence of the media domain is inseparable from the domain, habitus, and capital in social practice.

In the domain theory, sports celebrities rely on the diversity and inclusiveness of the field to accumulate their own symbolic value and carry out cross-border communication activities, thus shape different image labels. In recent years, more and more sports stars are active in the society field, as well as they use the media domain to expand their symbolic value, complete the power transformation in the cross-border field, and accumulate a large amount of symbolic capital. Through the observation method, 15 of the 24 tweets published by Gu Ailing Eileen on the Weibo platform not only involve daily activities, but also include advertising, endorsement promotion, documentary films. Meanwhile, making the audience understand that Gu Ailing Eileen is a professional athlete who loves life, it also strengthened the audience's awareness of her identity in the media domain. It can be said that the media domain is the symbol shaping field of sports celebrities. By digging out the hot spots of sports celebrities, creating selling points and spreading public opinion, they can win the victory of displaying value. After the Winter Olympics, Gu Ailing Eileen started her live streaming debut on TikTok. On that day, her number of fans exceeded 16 million, and the number of related video views exceeded 5 billion. In the TikTok live steaming room, Gu Ailing Eileen also chatted live with other stars, with a total of more than 36 million views, refreshing the record of TikTok live streaming ranking of the day. Through the live connection, Gu Ailing Eileen can not only show the audience her kind, strong and optimistic image as an athlete, but also quickly realize her conversion of field in the different fields. Therefore, in the image development of sports celebrities, celebrities can cross multiple domains, occupy a favourable position in the field, seize the opportunity to take advantage of the trend, gain more symbolic capital accumulation in the domain, and shape a diverse media image.

Capital is a tool for sports celebrities to carry out media communication practice in the domain theory, which can be subdivided into social capital and cultural capital, as well as helps them realize the superposition effect of capital in domain activities [27]. Through the observation method, the content of Gu Ailing Eileen's tweets not only include her daily activities, but also can see the spiritual qualities she possesses. These spiritual qualities and aesthetic trends conveyed by Gu Ailing Eileen constitute her cultural capital in the domain theory.

Similarly, through some advertisement tweets, it can also analyse Gu Ailing Eileen's network resources on the Internet. These resources based on network connections constitute the social capital she has in the domain theory. Therefore, Gu Ailing Eileen's accumulation of cultural capital, which has enabled her to further improve her social reputation and social influence; by earning social capital, she can help promote skiing sports, as well as create a self-disciplined and rigorous sports celebrity image for her. Furthermore, this media image can be continuously transformed in other domains, thereby realizing the re-accumulation of capital. There are also a few such examples in domain theory, like Yi Jianlian, the leader of the Chinese men's basketball team. He used the media platform to publish the national basketball construction and promotion plan, attracting basketball-loving students of all ages and providing them with professional basketball training. At this point, Yi Jianlian has become a word-of-mouth symbol, representing authority and ability, attracting more parents and students to sign up while expanding social influence. Meanwhile, Yi Jianlian's symbolic value is gradually transformed into social capital through later trainings, thus, realizing the accumulation and superposition of capital. It follows that the capital obtained by sports celebrities in the field not only improves their social status, but also accumulates certain network resources, further developing their media image.

In the domain theory, habitus guides sports stars to carry out cross-field activities, guides the formation of athletes' action strategies, and at the same time can ensure the balance between different domains, which has a promoting effect on sports culture [28]. Habitus, different from habit, is the sum of various habits of people and the product of the past practice activities of actors [29]. Gu Ailing Eileen's habitus formation in the online domain mainly depends on herself and her fans. As far as Gu Ailing Eileen herself is concerned, her habitus is to create a sports image of a "hero" figure through years of training. This near-perfect image is exactly what the national sportsmanship demands. From the perspective of fans, the fan economy is an important indicator for enhancing the value of sports stars. By interacting with netizens on Weibo, Gu Ailing Eileen has accelerated the accumulation of the number of fans and created the reproduction of personal symbols. This two-way interaction makes her the number one reading and interaction data in the sports star Weibo rankings. This kind of fans activities from the sports domain to the media domain would be carried out in accordance with the usual star support method, so that the "habitual support" of sports stars can quickly realize the value-added of personal symbols in accordance with the industry rules in the domain theory. However, due to the instability of the fan economy, excessive entertainment of the domain would also have negative effects, such as sports celebrity Zhang Jike. After the Rio Olympics, Zhang Jike

frequently participated in various variety shows, the high level of discussion caused his fans on Sina Weibo to grow linearly. Whereas, as Zhang Jike's career as a professional athlete came to an end, his competitive state was not as good as before. In 2018, Zhang Jike claimed after the game that his game status was affected by the loud shouting of fans, and that he could not hear the ball, thus affecting the performance of the game. Therefore, in the media environment, the excessive participation of fan culture has affected the original sports habitus of sports celebrities. Bourdieu believes that at the boundary between domains, the behaviour of each participant should be regulated [30]. The image mining of sports stars should be based on the premise of not affecting the training of athletes, to maintain the professionalism of sports athletes.

In the development of celebrities, capital, habitus and domain all affect the image construction of sports stars and can also formulate action strategies for sports celebrities in the domains. First, from the perspective of sports stars, the media domain can build better "persona" label for them. Meanwhile, cross-field activities can also generate more symbolic value for them, as well as promote the accumulation and transformation of symbolic capital. Furthermore, the media platform has also changed the original technical relationship and broadened the horizon of communication. The development of "personalized customization" of news algorithm recommendation technology makes the media pay more attention to the spread of humanistic spirit and give more attention to the star traffic development of athletes. In the end, the audience gradually changed their thinking habitus in the domain, weakened the gold awareness. Their love for athletes is not limited to the concept of gold medal supremacy, but more strongly individualistic. However, the prevalence of consumerism has restricted the construction of sports celebrity image by various factors in the field. For sports celebrities, they sometimes indulge in the symbolic value endowed by the media domain and neglect sports training, thus causing the original image of sports celebrities to collapse. Moreover, there are management gaps for the commercial interests earned by sports celebrities by virtue of their media platforms. They use the overlapping parts of commercial contracts to avoid part of tax, and there are obvious tax problems. Finally, the habitus of fans chasing stars also affects the athletic performance. The sports organizations in China still take a conservative attitude towards fan management, and the excessive entertainment of sports celebrities also implies the importance of fan management. Based on this, the research suggests that when sports celebrities improve their media management, firstly, sports stars should set career goals, improve their self-quality, and achieve a high degree of self-discipline. Additionally, the legislative department should improve the relevant laws and regulations, grasp the direction of legislation, and

standardize the income distribution of sports celebrities. Last, on the issue of fan management, it is necessary to set up a brokerage team, strengthen operation management, and achieve emotional resonance between celebrities and fans.

4. CONCLUSION

The media image of sports celebrities is the process of continuous construction and dissemination of their personal symbols in the media field. With the growth of user groups, the development trend of the media field is also increasing. In the media domain, sports celebrities can not only effectively and actively spread sports activities, but also dig deeper into their economic value, social value, and communication value. As an indispensable part of the domain of media communication, sports stars have made their media images more professional and more interactive through their cross-border communication practices. It can be said that the media image dissemination of sports celebrities is the result of the combined effect of domain, habitus and capital. The sports celebrity Gu Ailing Eileen discussed in this research, who freely switches between different domains to show the audience, not only her side as an athlete, she also gained more symbolic capital accumulation through intimate communication with the audience. Meanwhile, on the premise of maintaining her professional image, she has further shaped her diverse media image. Therefore, the media practice communication of sports stars needs the co-creation and maintenance of multiple parties. Their habitual performance in the domain directly affects the benefits of social capital and culture capital, and the fairness and order of capital access make the communication environment between various fields more interconnected and inclusive. Sports celebrities adhere to the principles of mutual respect and symbiosis and co-prosperity in domain activities and maintain a professional image while creating a more authentic, enthusiastic, energetic, and close-to-people media image.

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