

Athletes' Personal Branding on Social Media: A Case Study of Eileen Gu during the 2022 Beijing Olympics

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
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Abstract

This study examines how athletes use social media to shape and promote their personal brand, employing the case of Eileen Gu, a Chinese American skier who won three medals at the 2022 Beijing Olympics on behalf of China. Employing a content analysis methodology, the present research explores the evolution of Eileen Gu's personal brand and the molding of her media image through a comparative examination of her Instagram and Sina Weibo posts before and after the 2022 Beijing Olympics. In addition, grounded in semiotics theory, the study identifies key themes and patterns within Eileen Gu's social media content. Eileen Gu's narrative serves as a pertinent context for exploring the dynamics of personal brand development within the intersection of sports and social media. By examining the personal branding strategies of Eileen Gu on different social media platforms, the present study provides unique opportunities and interactions in transnational athletes' personal branding processes.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have assumed a paramount role in the daily lives of both individuals and organizations, serving as invaluable conduits for dissemination of information, ideas, interests, and diverse forms of expression as well as facilitating interactions to achieve diverse objectives (Chen, 2023). Celebrities, particularly athletes, have embraced social media for communication, with the platform becoming integral for some athletes to attain global sports stardom (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). The utilization of social media enables sports stars to extend their reach and connect more closely with their fan base through various means, such as posting photos and videos, engaging in interactions, promoting brands and products, and sharing personal insights (Abeza et al., 2017; Lee & Koo, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018). This engagement not only fosters a stronger bond with fans but also contributes to higher financial rewards, ultimately enhancing and diversifying their personal brands. In most cases, athletes with more glory or athletes engaged in sports with a wider audience are prone to wider media coverage and a greater social media presence. However, sports performance is not the unique ingredient in a sports star's market value. Less talented players who actively engage in social media can also attract millions of fans and benefit from the ensuing exorbitant contracts, while some champion athletes do not have a commercial endorsement contract in line with their status. This illustrates that social media has evolved into an additional field for athletes to compete.

Sports mega-events, such as the Olympics, draw substantial global attention, intertwining the realms of economy, politics, culture, and social life to showcase sport as a universal language (Kobayashi et al., 2023). Moreover, the use of athletic competition to draw in enormous amounts of attention, primarily through global media coverage, creates a space where the eyes of the world are solely on these athletes. For instance, the Olympics are one of the few occasions that could concentrate global attention in one location. At the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, Eileen Gu made history by winning two golds and one silver for China. In addition, the female skier has seen a spring in her commercial endorsements off the track, with Eileen Gu having been the spokesperson for over 27 brands before and after the Beijing Winter Olympics, with a total endorsement fee of over 100 million RMB (21st Century Business Review, 2022).

In October 2022, Forbes published a list of the “world's highest-paid female athletes”. In this list, Eileen Gu was ranked third behind Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams (Birnbaum, 2022). Apart from her performance on the field, Gu has an impressive social media presence. By the end of the Winter Olympics on the 20th, February 2022, her “Weibo Super Topic (微博超话)” reading volume had reached more than 9 billion. This paper aims to explore Eileen Gu’s social media posts, focusing on two key questions:

- 1) What image does Gu create on Sina Weibo and Instagram?
- 2) What explicit or implicit communication strategies does she employ to brand herself?

Employing content analysis and drawing on semiotics theory, the study analyzes Gu's social media posts before and after the 2022 Beijing Olympics (2022.1.1-2022.3.1), aiming to delineate the nuances between her domestic and international communication strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Personal branding of athletes

The term "brand" conventionally pertains to products, services, or corporations, yet marketers have posited that any perceptible image and identity can be construed as a brand (Zarkada, 2012). Individuals endowed with well-defined public images, such as artists, politicians, and scholars, stand to derive advantages from the recognition of their distinctive attributes as brands. Analogous to the principles of product branding, individual branding entails the amalgamation of associated attributes, images, and distinctions (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Within this framework, athletes, characterized by their widespread popularity and conspicuous recognition as individuals (Carlson & Donovan, 2008), have long been acknowledged as human brands (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Han et al., 2021). This acknowledgment is predicated on their unique attributes, which have the potential to engender enduring emotional connections with fans over the course of a lifetime (Kwon & Trail, 2001).

Integrating an individual with a brand, athlete brands transcend conventional commercialized offerings to manifest as intricate social entities (Osorio et al., 2020). As posited by Bredikhina et al. (2023), this social embeddedness, encompassing a network of social relations and connections, manifests across various strata, encompassing societal beliefs and norms, brand networks, and interpersonal relationships (Collins et al., 2010). Notably, athletes' appearances and conduct undergo meticulous scrutiny vis-à-vis societal norms and structures such as gender or race (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Fink et al., 2012). The intrinsic value of their brand is interlinked with other brands within their network (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), while aspects of their private lives, including romantic relationships, captivate public interest (Centeno & Wang, 2017).

The branding of athletes holds paramount significance due to their dual roles as both personal and social heroes to their fan base (Ilicic & Webster, 2015). Athletes endowed with a well-established brand can reap benefits not only during the tenure of their sports careers but also in the post-retirement phase (Arai et al., 2014). Although tournaments and competitive events serve as primary platforms for showcasing athletes, the construction of their personal brands predominantly occurs off the field (Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Existing research indicates that strategic marketing efforts can significantly influence athlete brands (Kunkel et al., 2022), with social media emerging as a pivotal tool in shaping and enhancing the brand image of athletes (Cocco et al., 2023; Pazmino & Pack, 2023; Park et al., 2020).

2.2. Athletes' personal branding via social media

Social media serves as a potent tool for organizations to articulate and convey a specific brand image, arguably rendering it the foremost branding instrument available to sport organizations today (Abeza et al., 2015). Beyond its significance for sport leagues, teams, and events, social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for athletes to cultivate, establish, and promote their personal brands (Geurin, 2017). As highlighted by Parmentier et al. (2013), strategically positioning and presenting a personal brand through an apt communication channel, such as social media, is imperative for effective branding. This strategic deployment, when executed proficiently, can contribute to the construction of a robust brand image (Keller, 2009), heightened brand awareness, and the generation of potential business prospects, including endorsement deals (Bruhn et al., 2012), brand extensions, and licensing contracts (Agyemang & Williams, 2016).

Contrary to the misconception that athletes' social media accounts predominantly focus on sports-related content, many posts encompass diverse themes such as humanitarian initiatives, family dynamics, personality traits, interests, dedication to their athletic pursuits, endorsements, and social engagements (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Athletes leverage social media for multifaceted purposes, including information sharing, fan interaction (Hambrick & Kang, 2015), marketing and endorsement activities (Eagleman, 2013), as well as managing connections with consumers to augment their brand awareness (Williams et al., 2015). Marshall (2010) underscores the unprecedented capacity of social media to facilitate self-presentation for sports celebrities, enabling more personalized and audience-pressure-free activities in this realm (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017; Buzeta et al., 2020). A wealth of literature on personal branding and social media attests to the effective utilization of online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by athletes (Cocco et al., 2023; Green, 2016; Hambrick et al., 2010; Park et al., 2020; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). However, as noted by Park et al. (2020), there exists a gap in athlete knowledge regarding personal branding via social media, with limited scholarly attention directed towards the exploration of athletes' strategies for branding through these platforms.

2.3. Semiotic theory and athletes' self-presentation

According to Peirce (1977), a symbol is only a symbol if it can be interpreted as such, and the meaning of the sign can be infinite. Sports stars, as icons on the first plane of signs, represent something to someone in some manner, and through the process of constructing meaning, they progressively alter their meaning from being merely associated with sports to other conceptualizations. This is reflected in Roland Barthes' connotation and denotation theory, where the meaning of a sign is created through layers of superimposition. Meanwhile, social media has given rise to a new form of celebrity representation that can be analyzed through the lens of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory.

Self-presentation is delineated as a mechanism through which individuals strategically communicate desired information to others. In contemporary society, personal websites and social media platforms have emerged as pivotal conduits for individuals to articulate and showcase facets of their identity. A pervasive

inclination exists wherein individuals endeavor to present themselves to a global audience by accentuating specific dimensions of their identity that align with societal expectations and elicit favorable responses. This inclination is underpinned by the fundamental notion that individuals meticulously select how to portray themselves, engaging in both frontstage performances and backstage conversations, thus conceptualizing social interactions as a nuanced form of theatrical expression (Goffman, 1959).

Celebrities, including sports figures, employ social media platforms as strategic tools to meticulously curate and manage their public image, tailoring presentations to suit diverse audiences and contexts (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2018; Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019). Symbolic interactionism contributes significantly to the symbolic construction of celebrities on social media, wherein individuals actively regulate the perceptions and evaluations of others while meticulously managing their online image to project desired characteristics. This phenomenon is intricately linked to the concept of personal branding, which has gained prominence in the digital era. Notably, athletes heavily leverage social media platforms to establish and cultivate their professional brand (Shreffler et al., 2016). The multifaceted presentation of symbolic elements on social media, coupled with direct engagement with fans, affords athletes the opportunity to construct and fortify their distinctive personal brand.

3. Method

In seeking to comprehend the distinctiveness and functionality of each element within a particular context, the case study emerges as a widely employed methodology for in-depth analysis of phenomena and hypothesis testing across various domains of knowledge. Eileen Gu's unprecedented influence during the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games renders her social media presence uniquely significant. Notably, she exhibits a dual facet: a robust impact as a public figure and an unusually substantial commercial value, a characteristic less commonly associated with athletes in winter sports. Consequently, we have chosen to scrutinize Eileen Gu's social media platforms as a case study, recognizing its profound research significance in unraveling the intricate interplay between her personal brand, social media impact, and commercial value.

In accordance with Krippendorff (2019, p. 2), content analysis is characterized as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use. It serves as a valuable method for systematically and objectively describing the content of communication in various forms and elucidating social discourse by discerning recurrent concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Schettini & Cortazzo, 2015). Within the content analysis framework, semiotic analysis is employed to explore both quantitative and qualitative relationships within a group of symbols. The comprehension of celebrities' representation on social media is facilitated through the lens of signification, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the meanings and symbolic constructs embedded in their online presence.

To facilitate the development and application of the Content Analysis method, the following phases have been systematically pursued:

3.1. Phase 1: Sample selection

To discern the prevailing frames of Eileen Gu’s social media presence during the 2022 Beijing Olympics, posts from both Instagram and Sina Weibo were compiled. As of the end of 2019, global social media users surpassed 2.82 billion, with Instagram boasting a monthly active user base of 1 billion (Hootsuite and We Are Social, 2020), solidifying its status as one of the world's most active platforms. Notably, among visual-centric platforms, Instagram garnered significant attention and played an indispensable role in disseminating information globally (Lunden, 2014; Mañas-Viniegra et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Weibo secured its position among the top 10 most utilized social media platforms globally, registering 73 million average active users per month in China as of June 2022 (Hootsuite and We Are Social, 2023). Serving as a representative social media platform in China, Weibo often features a plethora of celebrities' pictures, emojis, metaphors, and other irrelevant information, contributing to its multifaceted nature that extends beyond the specific content it aims to propagate (Wu, 2023).

To comprehensively capture the dynamics surrounding the 2022 Olympic Games, the present study extends beyond the two-week competition window, encompassing both the preparatory phase and the aftermath of the Games. Consequently, the timeframe for the analysis spans from January 1, 2022, to March 1, 2022. Within this duration, Eileen Gu published a total of 24 posts on Sina Weibo and 18 posts on Instagram, forming the basis of the examination.

Table 1. Criteria of sample selection

Database	Instagram and Sina Weibo
Period	1st. January 2022 – 1st. March 2022.
Search time	March 2023
Screening results	42 (24 posts of Sina Weibo and 18 posts of Instagram)
Final results	39 (21 posts of Sina Weibo and 18 posts of Instagram)

3.2. Phase 2: Organization and codification

Building upon the methodologies of data collection and analysis, the study systematically delved into Eileen Gu’s social media engagements on both Instagram and Weibo. Initially, the metrics of comments, reposts, and likes were meticulously recorded and compared. This quantitative foundation was then complemented by a thorough examination of the qualitative characteristics inherent in her posts. Subsequently, employing a coding scheme, the posts were systematically categorized based on their content, enabling nuanced comparisons between the two platforms. Employing an inductive approach, the analysis encompassed a total of 42 posts, excluding three posts published through Weibo's proprietary

system. Finally, a distinction was made, and classification ensued for 18 Instagram posts and 21 Weibo posts, centered on their unique informational and interactive attributes.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of social media

4.1.1. Basic data of social media accounts

Eileen Gu, the renowned Chinese freestyle skier, has established her online presence by creating accounts on three major social media platforms within China, namely “Douyin” (抖音), “Xiaohongshu” (小红书), and Weibo. Of the three, Weibo is her earliest registered account, which she has actively maintained over an extended period. A noteworthy aspect of Eileen Gu’s online presence is her Instagram account, “Eileen_gu”, which boasts an impressive 1.793 million followers and follows 1236 accounts. On the other hand, her Weibo account, bearing the name “Frog Princess Eileen,” has accumulated a significant number of fans, reaching 6.546 million. However, she followed only 110 accounts. Eileen Gu’s Weibo account features only one hashtag, “Freestyle Skiing World Champion”, compared to Instagram, where she employs several tags, including “2022 Olympic 2 gold medals and 1 silver medal,” “IMG Models Worldwide,” “Time 100 & Forbes 30 under 30,” and “Stanford '26”, which offer insights into her diverse range of identities and achievements.

Table 2. Social media account basic information

	Sina Weibo	Instagram
Account name	“青蛙公主爱凌”	Eileen_gu_
Followers	654.6 M	179.3M
Following	110	1236
Personal Label	“Freestyle Skiing World Champion”	“2022 Olympic 2 gold medals and 1 silver medal”, “IMG Models Worldwide”, “Time 100 & Forbes 30 under 30”, “Stanford '26”

4.1.2. Posts' content classification

From January to March 2023, Eileen Gu shared a combined total of 21 posts on her Weibo account and 18 posts on her Instagram account. A conceptual model of athlete brand image is developed by Arai et al. (2014), incorporating three key dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. In accordance with Guan (2017), social profiles of sports stars typically feature content falling into several categories, including characteristics of competitions and work status, personal life updates,

commercial and advertising endeavors, community service initiatives, and popular comments (Lyu et al., 2023). To classify and tally her posts, a tagging system consisting of the following categories: “competition and Training”, “personal life”, “commercial activity and advertising”, and “community service” was implemented.

Table 3. Categories of social media posting content

Social Media	Competition and Training	Personal Life	Commercial Activity and Advertising	Community Service
Instagram	14	7	3	3
Sina Weibo	11	2	11	1

Based on the data collected from a specified time frame, it is evident that Eileen Gu’s Instagram posts predominantly revolve around “competition and training”, constituting 14 of the tags used during the selected period. Subsequently, content related to her personal life and community service initiatives also holds prominence. In contrast, commercial activities and advertising represent the least frequent theme, accounting for only 11.1% of her Instagram posts. Conversely, her Sina Weibo account prominently features commercial activities and advertisements, with 11 instances, significantly surpassing the three tags observed on Instagram. Additionally, Eileen Gu posted about “competition and training” 11 times on Weibo, marginally less than on Instagram. However, it is noteworthy that she shared only two personal life and one community service-related post on Weibo, signifying a notable disparity from her more frequent engagement in these themes on her Instagram account.

4.1.3. Interactions with followers

Upon analyzing the chosen sample timeframe, an examination of Eileen Gu’s social media accounts reveals that her Sina Weibo account has garnered a greater number of likes compared to her Instagram account. The maximum number of likes on Weibo reached 1.05 million, whereas Instagram's highest count was only 325 thousand. Furthermore, the average number of likes on her Weibo account is nearly twice that of her Instagram account. Conversely, when scrutinizing the average number of comments, both accounts exhibit a near parity, with Weibo amassing 9 thousand comments and Instagram receiving 9.5 thousand comments. It is noteworthy that one particular Instagram post attracted a significantly higher number of comments than any of her Weibo posts, accumulating 94 thousand comments.

Table 4. Social media posting and interaction (in thousands)

Social media	Max Like	Max Comments	Max Repost	Avg like	Avg Comments	Avg Repost
Instagram	325	94	-	110	9.5	-
Sina Weibo	1050	64	63	208	9	7.3

The post with the highest number of comments on Instagram was shared on February 21, 2022, following the end of the Beijing Olympics. In the post, Eileen Gu summarized her personal achievements and records during the Winter Olympics, emphasizing her breakthrough as a female athlete. On the other hand, the post with the most comments on Weibo was shared on February 8, 2022, which was a forwarded post from her Instagram account. The content of the post featured her last win in the ski jumping competition, and the accompanying video was later deleted (the deletion date and reason is unknown), which may have affected the growth of subsequent comments and likes. It is also worth noting that the lack of a repost function on Instagram may contribute to a higher rate of comments and likes, as users can only interact through likes and comments.

4.2. Analysis of personal image

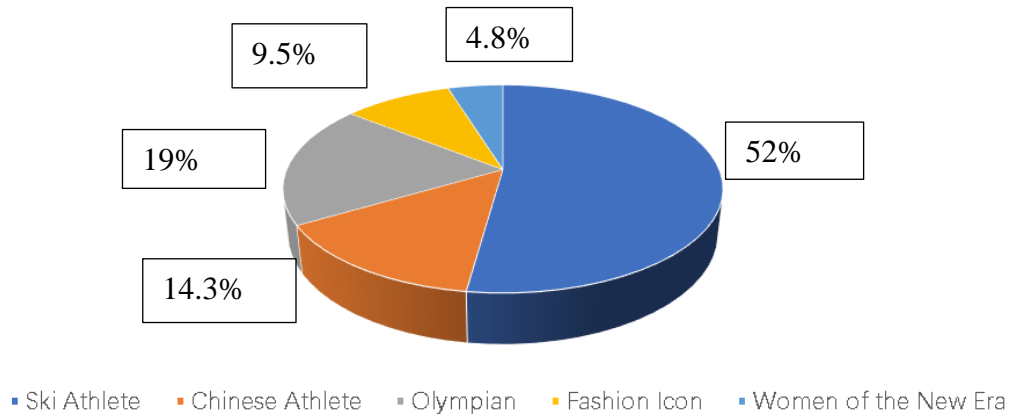
According to Barthes' theory, language plays a crucial role in shaping thought and experience by providing the signs and codes that give form and meaning to our social reality (Bignell, 1988). In the context of communication, semiotics places greater emphasis on the generation of meaning rather than the process of communication itself (Fiske, 1990). To further elucidate the concept of meaning, semiotics has evolved from a purely qualitative analysis to a combined qualitative and quantitative research model that goes beyond the mere description of phenomena and the analysis of texts. In this study, we collected posts from Weibo and Instagram over a specified period and identified the frequency of specific words that commonly appeared in the posts. Subsequently, we analyzed the semantic information conveyed by these words. We categorized the information content of the two platforms into five categories: sports activity, fashion, women, advertising, and others. However, it is important to note that the content of each post may encompass more than one category, necessitating the tagging of each post's content. By leveraging the data obtained, we generated a summary of Eileen Gu's image on each platform.

4.2.1. Eileen Gu's image on Sina Weibo

During the designated two-month period, Eileen Gu authored a total of 21 valid posts on Weibo. Out of these posts, 16 were published prior to the commencement of the Winter Olympic Games, four posts were issued during the competition, and one post was released following the conclusion of the event. The posts were categorized according to their content, with 11 of them related to sports. Among these sports-related

posts, the term “奥运会” (Olympics) was mentioned three times, “滑雪” (skiing) was utilized six times, and “金牌” (gold medal) appeared four times. To visually represent the proportion of each image, pie charts (Figure 1) were constructed after counting the number of posts that fell into each category.

Figure 1. Eileen Gu’s image on Sina Weibo



Through an analysis of Eileen Gu’s consistent utilization of comparable vocabulary and language, her public image can be discerned as subjective. This deliberate linguistic choice constructs the perception of her as a prodigious figure in skiing, thereby cementing her standing as an icon in the collective consciousness of the public. Advertising is a vital aspect of social media content, and it plays an integral role in Eileen Gu’s image analysis. Of the 21 posts, 11 were endorsements for various brands. The advertisements that she posted on Weibo were linked to her status as a Chinese skier. In these ads, such as those for JD (京东), Cadillac, and Mengniu (蒙牛), she employed the terms “家乡” (hometown) and “回家” (come back home) to emphasize the collective image of naturalized Chinese athletes. “北京” (Beijing), Eileen Gu’s hometown, was mentioned three times in her posts. Here, “北京” (Beijing) represents not only a place name but also a reflection of home.

Additionally, Eileen Gu used terms such as “年味” (the atmosphere of Spring Festival), “虎年” (Chinese year of the tiger), and “新年” (Spring Festival) in her posts to highlight traditional Chinese festivals and to express recognition of traditional Chinese culture. This has become a way of presenting her own identity. Through her posts, Eileen Gu confirms her image as a naturalized Chinese athlete.

In advertising for Quark (夸克)¹, Kohler², Genki Forest (元气森林), and Luckin Coffee (瑞幸咖啡), Eileen Gu utilized terms such as “努力” (endeavor), “比赛” (compete), “超越” (overstep), “跨越” (cross

¹. Quark is an intelligent search APP owned by Alibaba, equipped with an AI engine.

². Founded in 1873 and headquartered in Wisconsin, Kohler Co. specializes in kitchen and bath products, premium interior products, engines and power generation systems.

over), “挑战” (challenge), and “全力以赴” (make an all-out effort). These words always have a relationship between the spirit and overcoming limits, embodying the Olympic Games spirit. Eileen Gu successfully presents the image of Olympic athletes in the new era through the context of her posts.

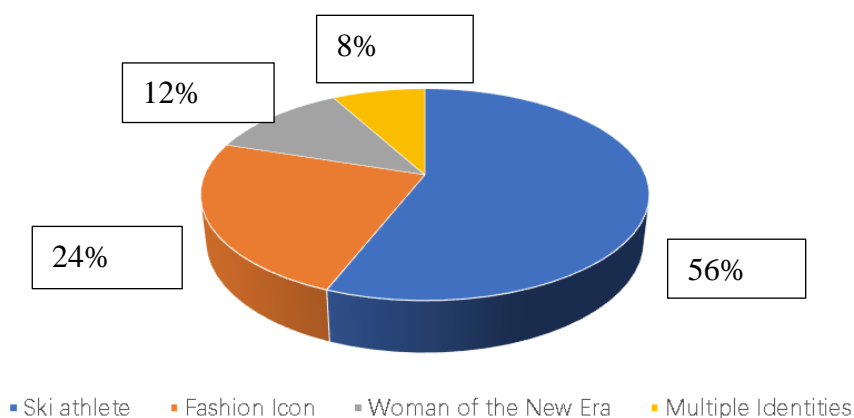
Furthermore, out of the 21 posts, two were fashion-related and one post was about the feminist theme. Eileen Gu uses Weibo to present a fashionable and contemporary image of girls to some extent. Overall, Eileen Gu's image on Weibo can be summarized as including the image of a skiing genius, the image of a naturalized Chinese athlete, the image of Olympic athletes in the new era, the image of fashion, and the image of a contemporary girl.

4.2.2. Eileen Gu's image on Instagram

During the designated time frame, Eileen Gu disseminated a total of 18 posts on her Instagram account. Prior to the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, she published 11 posts, followed by 6 posts during the competition, and only 1 post thereafter. Of these 18 posts, 14 pertained to sports activities, 6 contained fashion-related content, 3 included information on female themes, 3 were related to advertising, and only 1 was categorized as other. Overall, Eileen Gu's images on Instagram are primarily characterized by her skiing prowess, fashion sense, modern and independent womanhood, and diverse identity. These proportions are visually represented in the following pie chart (Figure 2).

It is apparent that sports topics accounted for more than half of the total posts. The nature of sports activities often garners a substantial amount of attention and feedback, particularly during the 22 Winter Olympic Games. During this period, Eileen Gu utilized the terms “Olympics” and “skiing” 8 and 5 times, respectively, within her posts on Instagram. The emphasis on the keyword “Olympics” underscored her identity as an international athlete and highlighted her exceptional skiing ability, contributing to her portrayal as a skiing prodigy.

Figure 2. Eileen Gu's image on Instagram



In addition to her involvement in sports activities, Eileen Gu demonstrated a predilection for sharing content pertaining to fashion through her posted publications. This type of content served as an essential component in shaping her image. On Instagram, more than 20% of the posts containing fashion-related content were shared by Eileen Gu, primarily featuring her daily outfits and the fashion brands she endorses, bolstering her fashion image.

The issue of women's rights and empowerment is a salient topic in contemporary society. By leveraging social media, Eileen Gu presents herself as an independent, modern woman, encourages women to engage in sports, and challenges stereotypical notions of female aesthetics. Consequently, the terms “girl” and “female” appeared 4 times on her Instagram account, with female-oriented topics comprising 11.5% of the posts.

As for the remaining content, it mainly pertains to identity. In 2 posts, Eileen Gu highlights the diversity of her identity, portraying herself not only as an athlete but also as a model, student, Chinese, American, teenager, and writer, among others. In this regard, Eileen Gu projects an image of a multifaceted identity.

5. Findings

5.1. Athlete's diversified social media image presentation

Consistent with the insights of Hu et al. (2023), narrating an athlete's life journey through social media stands as a strategic imperative, facilitating a more intimate connection with audiences and presenting athletes in nuanced dimensions. Eileen Gu has effectively employed a strategic approach to self-presentation on social media, utilizing her posts as a continuous means to refine her image and construct a framework of signified meanings around it. While her image across Weibo and Instagram exhibits both converging and diverging elements, portraying her as a skiing athlete, a fashion influencer, and an empowered woman, these platforms collectively underscore her multifaceted identity. The recurring emphasis on her role as a female skier is intricately tied to the contextual significance of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Furthermore, her persistent advocacy for female participation in sports and defiance of gender stereotypes positions her image as emblematic of an independent woman, reflecting the contemporary attitudes of women today. As underscored by Doyle et al. (2023), evaluations of athletes are entangled with issues of gender, status, and race. Eileen Gu's commitment to marginalized groups, coupled with her mixed Chinese American heritage and status as a minority athlete, underscores her sense of social responsibility. For example, on January 27th, her Instagram post declared, “Don't wait for the future to make change, our time is now. Be your own pilot.” This articulation not only reflects her perspective as a public figure but also conveys a positive life attitude.

Moreover, as rightly asserted by Mogaji and Nguyen (2023), women athletes cultivate their brands through excellence, seeking partnerships, upholding personal values, conveying distinctive experiences, and transcending the confines of sport. Yet, her image also serves as a carrier of cultural connotations and ideologies, and the transfer of meaning from her image to advertising messages has been effectively

leveraged to construct impactful advertising narratives. In the advertising of JD (京东) and Cadillac in her Weibo, she used videos to show her understanding of the concept of home and her attention to traditional Chinese festivals. Those brands emphasize an ethnic sentiment through the uniqueness of its identity. There are also brands such as Genki Forest (元气森林) and Luckin coffee (瑞幸咖啡) that use her spirit of hard work to reshape brand value. Eileen Gu's image emerges as a commercially potent asset, with her Olympic champion status further enhancing her appeal to brands eager to align with her positive image.

The interactive dynamics of social media empower the public to express identification with her image, thus amplifying the overarching ideological communication encapsulated by her persona. Consequently, Eileen Gu's image transcends its material, objective existence to acquire a symbolic dimension. Functioning as a subject of communication and information dissemination, her image constitutes a multipolar field marked by diverse and intricate elements. The conveyance of her image inherently carries nuanced meanings, perceived by the public and transmuted into individual signs. Platforms such as Instagram and Weibo become arenas where the realization of figurative signified depends on the public's decoding of the codes embedded in Eileen Gu's posted information. This decoding process significantly influences the construction of her image, engaging a spectrum of decoding methods.

5.2. Transnational athlete's targeted multi-platform communication strategy

Eileen Gu, a Chinese Olympic champion, employs different positioning strategies on her two social media accounts to effectively build her personal brand and increase the value of communication. Her Weibo account primarily targets Chinese netizens in the mainland, while her Instagram account aims at followers worldwide outside the "Internet Firewall" because international netizens tend to recognize her as a world champion with both Chinese heritage and American identity. For this reason, Eileen Gu's positioning strategies on Weibo and Instagram diverge substantially. For instance, her Weibo account solely highlights her status as a ski champion through its tags, which has garnered her recognition among a significant portion of Chinese netizens. In contrast, on Instagram, she defines herself more extensively, showcasing her multifaceted identity as both an athlete and a model.

The nature of the content posted on each account also differs considerably. Eileen Gu's Weibo account primarily contains advertisements and competition updates, while she shares more personal life information on Instagram. This distinction can be attributed to her upbringing as a mixed-race athlete in the United States, where she is more accustomed to using Instagram. Her preference for Instagram over Weibo is evident from her following counts. The number of people she follows on Instagram is more than ten times that of those she follows on Weibo, indicating that Instagram is the platform she is likely to use daily, while Weibo may be more of a platform for commercial advertising and personal image display, possibly maintained by a Chinese team.

Eileen's advertising endeavors on both Instagram and Weibo demonstrate a targeted and strategic approach. On Instagram, her collaborations predominantly involve fashionable, high-end brands, such as

Louis Vuitton, IWC³, and Beats⁴. These partnerships not only contribute to the brand narrative but also leverage Eileen Gu's Instagram as a communication channel to reach and resonate with the younger demographic, fostering an imaginative connection with these brands. For instance, on 15th January, her post featured the caption "Guess what I'm listening to @beatsbydre," accompanied by photos of the headphones, effectively portraying her youthful demeanor. Another instance, on 24th January, she explicitly mentioned that her outfit was from Louis Vuitton. Conversely, the performance of diverse advertisement types on Weibo exhibits variations due to its predominantly Chinese user base. Eileen Gu's standing as a Chinese world champion athlete affords her a broader audience in the Chinese market, prompting a heightened focus on brand awareness in her brand partnerships. As evidenced on 18th January and 26th January, Eileen Gu shared posts endorsing Mengniu, a well-established dairy brand in China."

Eileen Gu actively cultivates a personal image across various social media platforms and engages with her followers through diverse content releases. As the portrayal of sports stars in media has a direct impact on their popularity, image, and commercial value, Eileen Gu leverages Weibo as a business-oriented social platform, posting a significantly greater number of advertisements than on Instagram. This is attributable to her keen awareness of her commercial value as a sports star, particularly in China, which is reflected in the number of likes she receives on Weibo. Furthermore, major sporting events like the 2022 Beijing Olympics offer an exceptional opportunity to build individual brand identity and engage in image communication. During the Beijing Winter Olympics, Eileen Gu actively shared social media content by integrating event labels and personal images with commercial advertisements, thereby enhancing her reach and increasing her commercial benefits.

6. Conclusion

Facing new challenges as well as opportunities, sport brands, including athlete brands must strategically manage their content creation and positioning (Manoli, 2022). Eileen Gu's achievements in the winter of 2022 have researchers looking back at her strategic social media communications strategies. Upon investigating the utilization of Instagram and Weibo by Eileen Gu, it became apparent that these two new information and communications technologies have become unique and effective ways to build personal image while communicating with followers during significant events.

After a thorough examination of posts from both platforms, the authors have revisited the image of Eileen Gu and have discovered the diverse nature of her image. Despite the presence of numerous similarities in the content transmitted on both accounts, comparing them has revealed noteworthy differences. On Weibo, Eileen Gu actively presents her Chinese identity and employs her influence to diversify her commercial advertising to maximize its commercial value. Conversely, on Instagram, she creates a diverse identity, targeting a segmented audience and highlighting her identity as a minority and female

³. IWC Schaffhausen is a Swiss luxury watchmaking brand since 1868.

⁴. Beats Electronics is a manufacturer of audio products founded in Culver City, California.

athlete, accepting endorsements from only a few select brands that align with her image. Throughout the chosen sample selection period, Eileen Gu's differentiated social media communication strategy has contributed to creating her personal brand and advancing her commercial interests.

In addition, it should be noted that like any research study, this study has some limitations. For example, due to the small sample size, this case study may not be the most comprehensive in summarizing Eileen Gu's social media communication strategies. Additionally, in future research, the authors suggest selecting another athlete for comparison to Eileen Gu to gain further insights.

Disclosure statement

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