

#SELFIES at the 2016 Rio Olympics: Comparing Self-Representations of Male and Female Athletes from the U.S. And China

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Social media provides athletes an efficient platform on which to build and maintain their online image. Applying the self-representation theory of Goffman (1959), this study explored the gendered differences between the self-portrayals of U.S. and Chinese athletes. Findings suggest that hegemonic gender norms still had a strong hold on Chinese athletes' self-disclosure, whereas minimal gender differences emerged between male and female U.S. athletes. Results suggested that cultural background had a substantial impact on self-representation for all participants. Although athletes might claim agency when presenting themselves on social media, the practice of self-portrayal should be examined within specific cultural contexts.

The 2016 Rio Olympic Games, dubbed "the most social games ever," inspired 1.5 billion interactions on Facebook and 75 billion total impressions on Twitter (Akhtar, 2016; Liu, 2016). In China, Sina Weibo—a Chinese Twitter-like social media platform—generated 630 million posts related to the Rio Olympics, yielding 183.9 billion impressions (Weibo Data Center, 2016). Compared to the television ratings drop for Olympic broadcasts (Dan, 2016; Porter, 2016), social media has emerged as an important access channel for Olympic audiences. In this sense, the worldwide popularity of social media has substantially changed the communication landscape in sport (Lupinetti, 2015).

As one important group of stakeholders in sport, athletes frequently use social media to share information and interact with fans (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). In the National Basketball Association (NBA), 87% of players participated on at least

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one social media platform in 2016, while more than 70% of Chinese national athletes had personal Sina Weibo accounts in 2016 (Neely-Cohen, 2016; Wang, 2016). Researchers argue that social media tools grant athletes agency and autonomy when constructing an online identity, potentially counteracting their portrayals in mass media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Previous studies on media representation have found that mass media tend to portray male and female athletes according to hegemonic gender expectations (e.g., Xu, Billings, & Fan, 2018). For instance, they usually emphasize the masculine traits of male athletes, such as strength and power, whereas the family relationships and physical attractiveness of female athletes are more likely to be highlighted (e.g., Coche & Tuggle, 2016). These strategies have been widely criticized for reinforcing male hegemony and marginalizing female athletes as *the other* in sport (Bruce, 2016).

Although numerous studies exist related to mass media representations of athletes, self-portrayal on social media is still an emerging area in sports communication. Shreffler, Hancock, and Schmidt (2016), for instance, examined 207 Twitter avatars of female athletes and suggested that athletic performance was the most frequently presented theme, challenging the stereotypes of female athletes in mass media. However, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) examined 800 Instagram posts by athletes and found that—compared to their male counterparts—female athletes tended to share more pictures taken in private settings, echoing stereotypical gender norms. Given these findings, whether self-representation on social media empowers female athletes or reinforces male hegemony is still debatable.

Although prior studies have found significant gender trends in athlete self-representation on social media, nearly all of them have focused on the social media profiles of U.S. athletes, with little or no attention devoted to Asian athletes. Given the social construction underpinnings of gender (see e.g., Butler, 2011), gendered self-portrayal could vary from one culture to the next. The current study addresses this gap by examining how athletes from China and the United States—two of the largest nation states with distinct histories, ideologies, and sport systems—constructed their identities on social media during the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Literature Review

Individuals tend to present themselves by highlighting characteristics that they personally value (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As a practice of managing personal impressions, self-representation was initially proposed by Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he asserted that human beings express their identities via verbal and non-verbal messages. Compared to non-verbal expressions, verbal messages are easier to manage during self-representation. In this sense, the advent of the internet has allowed users to construct and maintain self-portrayal with minimal or no non-verbal information, offering an efficient platform for controlling information disclosure (Papacharissi, 2002a).

Although individuals claim agency and autonomy when constructing their online images, self-representation can hardly be defined as a purely individual pursuit. Some researchers have argued that self-representation is a continual process of negotiation between (a) individual goals and (b) the perception of audience desires (Bortree, 2005; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), both of which might be heavily influenced by social context. For instance, living and competing in a highly hegemonic society, athletes might internalize patriarchal gender values and adjust self-portrayals to social expectations. Applying self-representation theory, the current study examined how U.S. and Chinese athletes differed in their gendered self-representation on social media in order to identify potential cultural influences on gendered self-portrayal.

Gendered Media Portrayals in Mass Media

The gendered portrayals of men and women in the mass media have been widely explored by scholars from multiple disciplines. Examining gendered representations in advertising, Goffman (1979) asserted that daily commercials captured the structural relationship between men and women. The concept of *ritualization of subordination* was proposed to capture the inferior status of women in advertisements. Smiling, knee bending, body arching, and head tilting—framing strategies frequently applied when depicting women—were categorized as operating indicators of submission and inferiority. Although Goffman's study was exploratory in nature, it offered valuable insights for investigating gender representation in the mass media.

Facial displays are another promising measure of gendered media representation. Archer, Iritani, Kimes, and Barrios (1983) conducted a series of studies—including three descriptive studies and two experiments—examining facial prominence across multiple contexts. The experiments pointed out that images with high facial prominence tended to trigger more positive evaluation in terms of ambition, intelligence, appearance, and more. The authors asserted that the emphasis on men's faces in the studies was consistent with the stereotypical idea that men were valued more for their minds and ideas, while women were more appreciated for the physical beauty of their bodies.

Even in recent decades, sport has remained a male-dominated social structure, often affording women only limited access (Broch, 2016). Sport communication studies have found that male and female athletes are often depicted according to gender stereotypes (e.g., Bruce, 2016). Compared to male athletes, female athletes are characterized according to their relationships with others (e.g., mother, wife, or girlfriend) more often than their athletic ability (McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012). Some studies have uncovered, in a variety of cultural contexts, that female athletes are sexualized as objects of desire or infantilized as "girls" or "babies" (Jones, 2012; Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013). Based on these findings, media representations of female athletes have often undervalued their athletic accomplishments.

However, other studies have discovered positive changes in gendered representation in sport media, especially during the Olympics. In the 2012 London Olympics, for the

first time, female athletes received more than half of the clock time and name mentions during NBC's primetime coverage (Billings et al., 2014). Based on a quantitative analysis of photographs and articles published by ESPN Women (espnW), Wolter (2015) found that female athletes, framed as serious and legitimate, were characterized by emotional strength and physical skill. In a study conducted in Australia, Xu, Billings, Scott, Lewis, and Sharpe (2017) reached similar conclusions. Despite these more empowering depictions, male dominance in sport has rarely been challenged, but these studies suggest that media representations of the Olympics may need further study.

Self-Representation in Media Studies

With the emergence of personal web publishing, individuals have had the opportunity to become media content producers, not merely consumers (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Instead of being objects of portrayal, they can construct their own sense of self in a virtual community (Papacharissi, 2002a). Early online self-representation studies focused on personal home pages, blogs, and dating websites. Looking at how individuals used personal home pages to construct an online image, Papacharissi (2002b) found that they used both direct textual expression and indirect expression (e.g., hyperlinks and animation) to represent themselves. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) explored various self-representation strategies that individuals used for their online dating site profiles; they found that the goal of finding a romantic partner led to a negotiation between impression management and authentic self-disclosure. Although these studies did not directly examine gender difference, they established a foundation for investigating individual online self-representation.

Since 2010, the number of social media users has increased at an unprecedented rate; as of 2017, the number worldwide is 2.46 billion (Statista, 2018). This popularity stems from the opportunity that social media sites create for individuals: to portray an idealized self online. Applying the framework of evolutionary psychology, Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2014) explored gender differences in Facebook usage with respect to family relationships, status, risk-taking, and emotional expression; they found that self-representation was consistent with traditional gender norms. In an earlier study, Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) also examined gender difference in self-portrayal on MySpace and found that female self-objectification was pervasive in their self-disclosure; they speculated that the pressure of social comparison on social media intensified the patriarchal gender values that were typically in play in their offline lives.

Athlete Self-Representation on Social Media

In the domain of male-dominated sport, female athletes have been situated in a paradox of gender identity (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). On the field, female

athletes are expected to show a high level of competitiveness and tenaciousness, but this expectation conflicts with the traditional perception of femininity as gentle and elegant (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). In terms of athlete self-representations on social media, Lupinetti (2015) examined how amateur female figure competitors presented themselves on Instagram, finding that participants enjoyed posting athletics-related pictures on their social media sites because the posts would encourage other women to be physically fit.

Emmons and Mocarski (2014) analyzed the visual self-representation of professional athletes on Facebook, suggesting that, although some patriarchal values persisted, both male and female athletes preferred wearing uniforms, and very few sexualized photographs were posted. Given these progressive findings in the literature, some scholars have asserted that social media enables athletes to construct their own images online, potentially diminishing the hegemonic notions that have plagued female athletes and reframing the landscape of sport for women (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).

However, some scholars have argued that patriarchal gender norms still have a strong impact on athlete self-representation. Applying Goffman's theory of self-representation, Smith and Sanderson (2015) examined the Instagram feeds of 27 professional athletes; they found that—compared to male athletes—female athletes were more likely to post photographs that emphasized their breasts, a clear indicator of self-objectification. More recently, Gainor (2017) examined how gender expectations were exhibited via professional athlete self-representation. By examining *head tilting, clothing, knee bending, smiling*, and other indicators, the author suggested that both male and female professional athletes were pressured to follow gender expectations. In this sense, regardless of their involvement in athletic activity, professional athletes still adopt widely-accepted gender roles.

Thus, studies related to the gendered self-representation of athletes provide contradictory findings. In addition, nearly all studies on this topic have focused on gender differences within a single culture (i.e., the United States), failing to consider the potential cultural effects on athlete self-portrayal. This study will fill the gap by introducing a variable of national origin to explore gender differences in athlete self-representation across China and the United States.

Selecting China and the United States in Examining Athlete Self-Representation

China and the U.S., the two largest economies, have two of the largest populations in the world. Both countries also have very large presence and are perennial powers in different Olympic sports that are consummate with their sports market size. Given these factors, a cross-cultural comparison of male and female athletes' social media posts in these countries, emerges as a topic of interest, especially considering the substantial differences that the two countries claim in terms of culture, history, and ideology.

According to Hofstede (2001), collectivist ethos is ingrained in the Chinese society, with the group's well-being is established as the best guarantee for the individual; the United States, however, is marked with an intense desirability of individualism, in which the individual's well-being is viewed as the root of the country's greatness. Prior studies demonstrated that the individualism-collectivism dichotomy exerts great influences on a variety of social expressions across the two countries, such as advertising appeals (Zhang & Gelb, 1996), emotion-evoking (Stipek, 1998), and social lofting (Earley, 1989).

The contrast between capitalism and socialism marks as another salient difference between China and the United States. In socialist China between 1949 and 1979, the party-state held a sovereign claim on individual bodies, in which gender differences were largely eliminated by forcing women to surrender femininity (Xiong, 2015). Over a long time, Chinese people were encouraged to become social *producers* rather than resident *consumers* to serve the needs of industrialization (Xiong, 2015). Although the practice of a market economy system was introduced by the Chinese government in the 1980s, the socialist ideology still has an impact on governing the daily life in contemporary Chinese society.

Mediated gender portrayals can also vary by a country's developmental stage in gender equality (Paek, Nelson, & Vilela, 2011). According to the Gender Development Index, which measures the gender gap between men and women in health, knowledge, and living standards, the United States is listed as one of the top 10 most advanced countries, while China is ranked as No. 90 among 188 countries in the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). In the sports domain, Title IX of the Education Amendments was passed in 1972 to protect individuals from sexual discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), greatly encouraging American women and girls to participate in sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). In China, however, although elite female athletes have achieved great success during international sporting events, sport competitions at the international level, this has often been an orchestrated political instrument for achieving national glory (Xu et al., 2018) rather than an equal opportunity for its citizens to pursue.

In this sense, the substantial differences between China and the United States provide an ideal comparison to examine cultural differences in athlete self-portrayals on social media during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Based on previous literature, five research questions were proposed:

RQ1: How do male and female athletes from China and the United States compare in the *theme of visual images* they post on social media?

RQ2: How do male and female athletes from China and the United States compare in the *level of self-subordination* portrayed in the images they post on social media?

RQ3: How do male and female athletes from China and the United States compare in the *level of reveal in clothing* in the images they post on social media?

RQ4: How do male and female athletes from China and the United States compare in the *level of action* portrayed in the images they post on social media?

RQ5: How do male and female athletes from China and the United States compare in the *face ratio* of the images they post on social media?

Methods

To examine these questions, the current study applied content analysis to photographs posted on the social media accounts of male and female athletes from China and the United States. The photographs examined were posted and retweeted by U.S. and Chinese athletes on social media surrounding the 2016 Rio Olympics. Thus, the unit of analysis was the photograph. To gain a comprehensive view of self-representation during this time period, photograph collection started seven days before the Games began and ended seven days after the Games concluded. The data collected were photographs posted or retweeted on social media between July 29, 2016 and August 28, 2016 by U.S. and Chinese athletes who participated in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Selection of Media Platforms

For this study, Sina Weibo was selected as the social media platform from which to collect photographs posted or retweeted by Chinese Olympic athletes, while Twitter was the social media platform from which to collect photographs posted or retweeted by U.S. athletes. Sina Weibo is one of the most popular social media in China, hosting 503 million registered users and 222 million monthly active users (Freier, 2015; Ong, 2013). In China, Sina Weibo is viewed as the primary social media platform on which celebrities share information and interact with fans; Twitter is not an available social media within China. As one of the top 10 most visited websites in the United States (Alexa, 2017), Twitter has more than 328 million monthly active users worldwide, generating an average of 500 million tweets per day (Aslam, 2017).

Athletes, Sample Size, and Data Collection

In terms of sample size, 300 photographs were collected for each demographic group: female Chinese athletes, female U.S. athletes, male Chinese athletes, and male U.S. athletes. A total of 1,200 photographs were collected, a sample large enough to produce generalizable findings (Dixon, Singleton, & Straits, 2015).

To select the representative content, complete lists of all Olympic athletes from both the U.S. and China were retrieved from the official website of the International Olympic Committee. The four lists were randomly sorted onto an Excel spreadsheet. Using the sorted lists, the researcher searched for each name on Sina Weibo (for Chinese athletes) or Twitter (for U.S. athletes). If an athlete had a Sina Weibo or Twitter account, photographs posted or retweeted by that athlete during the designated time period were included in the analysis; if no photographs were found, the researcher excluded this athlete and moved on to the next name on the list.

Additionally, to counter significant variation in the frequency and quantity of photographs posted or retweeted by single athletes, no more than 10 photographs were collected from any single social media profile. If an athlete posted or retweeted fewer than ten photographs during the time period, all of them were included. If an athlete posted more than ten, the researcher randomly selected ten from his or her total. The researcher stopped collecting photos for each group once the number of selected photographs reached 300 for that group. In total, 1,200 photographs were collected from the social media profiles of 185 athletes, including 54 American female athletes, 59 American male athletes, 33 Chinese female athletes, and 39 Chinese male athletes.

Coding was done by two doctoral students. After initial training, coders were given 80 randomly chosen photographs from the sample. Based on discussion and resolution of disagreement, an additional 100 randomly chosen photographs were coded. Final reliability was determined using all 180 photographs (15% of the final sample). Individual reliability scores will be reported below.

Using a coding scheme adapted from Goffman (1979) and others (Archer et al., 1983; Emmons & Mocarski, 2014; Gainor, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), the researcher coded the collected photographs in two stages. In the first stage, all photographs were coded using two variables: (a) theme of the photograph (i.e., personal life (e.g. hanging out with friends and family) ($N = 280$, 23.3%), athletic life (e.g., training and competitions) ($N = 805$, 67.1%), business life (e.g., promoting products) ($N = 94$, 7.8%), or other ($N = 21$, 1.8%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .94$); (b) focus of the photograph (i.e., "self," $N = 807$, 67.3%) or others ($N = 393$, 32.7%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .97$).

Only photographs that featured the athlete who posted them ($N = 807$, 67.3%) entered the second stage of coding. These pictures were coded into four major categories. First, the self-subordination category, includes 1) emotion level, i.e., showing emotion ($N = 537$, 69.7%) or not showing emotion ($N = 221$, 28.7%); 2) or no face shown ($N = 12$, 1.6%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .97$); 3) smiling, i.e., "yes" ($N = 450$, 83.8%) or "no" ($N = 87$, 16.2%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .95$); 4) head position, i.e., "tilted" ($N = 172$, 22.8%) or "not tilted" ($N = 582$, 77.2%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .90$); 5) body position, i.e., "upright" ($N = 238$, 31.6%), "bended knee/arched body" ($N = 204$, 27.1%), or "other" ($N = 312$, 41.4%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .93$); 6) presence of others, i.e., "yes" ($N = 475$, 58.9%) or "no" ($N = 332$, 41.1%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .99$); and 7) point of view, i.e., below eye level ($N = 211$, 26.1%), "above eye level" ($N = 113$, 14.0%), or "other" ($N = 483$, 59.9%) (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .93$).

Second, the next category describes clothing. This category includes: 1) type, i.e., “in uniform” ($N = 511$, 64.8%), “not in uniform” ($N = 264$, 33.5%), or “other” ($N = 13$, 1.6%) (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .89$); and 2) level of reveal, measured on a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *not revealing* and 5 = *highly revealing*), with a mean value of 1.54 ($SD = 1.11$) (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .95$). Third, another category illustrates level of action, which was assessed on a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *completely passive* and 5 = *highly active*) ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.17$) (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .95$). Lastly, the fourth category depicts face ratio, which was gauged on a 5-item Likert-type scale, 1 = *under 20%* and 5 = *80% to 100%*; the mean value for this category is 2.11 ($SD = 1.11$) (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .91$).

Results

Research Questions 1 and 2 were assessed by a Chi-square analysis. RQ1 addressed differences in photograph theme across gender and nationality. To test the two variables, 16 separate Chi-square tests were conducted. Table 1 reports the frequencies of various themes and notes significant differences.

As indicated in Table 1, three out of 16 Chi-square tests were significant. That is, female Chinese athletes posted significantly fewer photographs about athleticism than male Chinese athletes. Also, compared to female U.S. athletes, female Chinese athletes tended to post more photographs related to personal life and fewer photographs related to athletics.

RQ2 addressed self-subordination differences across gender and nationality. To test the two variables, 60 separate Chi-square tests were conducted. Table 2 reports the frequencies of each indicator and notes significant differences.

As highlighted in Table 2, 12 out of 60 Chi-square tests were significant. In terms of emotion, female Chinese athletes and male U.S. athletes were more likely to show emotion in their posted photographs than male Chinese athletes. Female Chinese athletes and male U.S. athletes were also more likely to be smiling in their posted photographs than male Chinese athletes. In terms of head position,

Table 1
The Theme Differences across Gender and Nationality

	CHN Men	CHN Women	US Men	US Women	Total
Personal	73	96 ^b	59	52 ^b	280
Athletics	205 ^a	167 ^{ac}	214	219 ^c	805
Business	18	29	23	24	94
Others	4	8	4	5	21
Total	300	300	300	300	1200

^a $\chi^2 = 3.88$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; ^b $\chi^2 = 13.08$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$; ^c $\chi^2 = 7.01$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$.

Table 2
The Self-Subordination Differences across Gender and Nationality

	Chinese Men	Chinese Women	US Men	US Women	Total
Showing emotion	88 ^{ac}	133 ^a	156 ^c	160	537
No emotion	87 ^{bd}	48 ^b	46 ^d	40	221
No face shown	6	2	1	3	12
Total	181	183	203	203	770
Smiling	66 ^{ef}	114 ^e	131 ^f	139	450
Not smiling	22	19	25	22	88
Total	88	133	156	161	538
Tilted head	30 ^j	48 ^j	42	52	172
No tilted head	144	131	160	147	582
Total	174	179	202	199	754
Upright	72	59	64 ^j	43 ^j	238
Posed knee/body arched	46	49	48	61	204
Others	47 ^{hi}	71 ^h	88 ⁱ	96	312
Total	175	179	200	200	754
Presence with others	102 ^k	100 ^l	134 ^k	139 ^l	475
Solo	89	96	76	71	332
Total	191	196	210	210	807
Below eye angle	48	47	65	51	211
High eye angle	24	25	34	30	113
Others	119	124	111	129	483
Total	191	196	210	210	807

^a $\chi^2 = 9.16$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$; ^b $\chi^2 = 11.27$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$; ^c $\chi^2 = 18.95$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$;
^d $\chi^2 = 12.64$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$; ^e $\chi^2 = 12.80$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$; ^f $\chi^2 = 21.45$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$;
^g $\chi^2 = 4.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; ^h $\chi^2 = 4.88$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; ⁱ $\chi^2 = 12.45$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$;
^j $\chi^2 = 4.12$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; ^k $\chi^2 = 4.34$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; ^l $\chi^2 = 6.36$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

compared to Chinese men, Chinese women tended to post photographs in which they were tilting their heads. In terms of body position, compared to U.S. women, U.S. men were more likely to post photographs depicting themselves upright. Compared to female U.S. athletes, female Chinese athletes tended to post more photographs showing only themselves than showing themselves with others. Compared to male U.S. athletes, male Chinese athletes posted more photographs showing only themselves than showing themselves with others.

RQ3 addressed differences in the level of revealing clothing across gender and nationality. Considering that athletes cannot determine how their uniforms are designed, this study views uniforms as not revealing by nature. To answer this research question, a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted without including pictures portraying athletes in uniform into the analysis. The ANOVA test of 264 cases did not yield any significant differences.

RQ4 addressed differences in the level of action across gender and nationality. A two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with two main effects and one interaction effect between gender and nationality examined. Findings suggested that the main effect of gender was statistically significant ($F(1, 803) = 8.48, p < .05$). Compared to female athletes ($M = 2.09, SD = 1.06$), male athletes ($M = 2.32, SD = 1.26$) tended to post photographs showing themselves in more active poses.

RQ5 addressed differences in face ratio across gender and nationality. A two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with two main effects and one interaction effect between gender and nationality examined. Findings suggested that the main effect of nationality was statistically significant ($F(1, 801) = 11.84, p < .05$). Compared to Chinese athletes ($M = 1.98, SD = 1.01$), U.S. athletes ($M = 2.24, SD = 1.11$) had a significantly higher level of face ratio in their posted photographs.

Discussion

This study identified significant gender differences among Chinese and U.S. athletes in terms of visual self-representation on social media during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Although some hegemonic gender values persisted, U.S. athletes—to a large extent—transcended the traditional gender stereotypes uncovered in mass media representations of male and female athletes. This is especially true for U.S. athletes, when compared to their Chinese counterparts, indicating that culture could exert a significant impact on gendered self-disclosure. This study is one of the first to explore gender differences in the way athletes from different countries engage in self-representation on social media.

In terms of photograph theme, all significant gender differences were related to Chinese women athletes. Compared to male Chinese athletes, female Chinese athletes posted significant fewer photographs pertaining to athletics, a finding that is consistent with hegemonic gender stereotyping (e.g., Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). That is, female self-image is often tied to their personal life or beauty. Previous studies have frequently accused the mass media of highlighting non-sport-related characteristics of female athletes (e.g., sexuality, appearance, and family relationships) and giving their identity as an athlete secondary importance (Bruce, 2015). Interestingly, in the current study, although female Chinese athletes claimed agency in presenting themselves on social media, they still posted fewer photographs related to their athleticism than their male counterparts.

Confucianism, an ideology based on the core value of male dominance, has influenced Chinese society for thousands of years (Leung, 2003; Xie, 1994). Confucian ethics legitimize female subservience and obedience to men and primarily define women in terms of their relationships with men (e.g., wife, mother, and sister) (Leung, 2003). Although gender equality is currently one of the

fundamental state policies in the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government has impeded gender equality movements in China because public awareness of gender inequality could potentially trigger domestic disturbance (Fu, 2017).

Many scholars have revealed that hegemonic gender values still have a strong hold on Chinese society and that individual perceptions of masculinity and femininity in China are highly polarized (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005; Xu et al., 2018). In this sense, living and competing in China, female athletes might have internalized patriarchal gender norms and, therefore, have posted fewer photographs pertaining to their athleticism to accommodate social expectations of women's gender role in Chinese society.

Also, compared to female U.S. athletes, female Chinese athletes posted significantly more photographs related to their personal life and significantly fewer photographs pertaining to their athleticism, a contrast that could largely be attributed to cultural differences between the two countries. Before 1972, one of 27 American women played sports, and now the ratio is two in five; that is, American women and girls' participation has grown more than 900% since then (Women's Sports Foundation, 2017).

In China, however, sport (and competition at the international level)—to a large extent—has been organized by the state and applied as a political tool to attain national glory (Xu et al., 2018) rather than a participating opportunity for its citizens. Although Chinese elite female athletes have achieved stunning success during international sporting events, gender equality in sport is not well identified or perceived by Chinese people. In this sense, female U.S. athletes—compared to their Chinese counterparts—might be more used to identifying themselves as athletes and take more pride in their athleticism, echoing Paek et al.'s (2011) findings that mediated gender portrayals could vary by a country's developmental stage in gender equality.

In terms of self-subordination, female Chinese athletes were more likely to show emotion, smile, and tilt their heads than male Chinese athletes; these features are all strong indicators of inferiority and submission in gender display (Goffman, 1979). A similar pattern has frequently been found in mass media portrayals of male and female athletes across multiple cultures (e.g., Bruce, 2016). Based on previous findings, tilting one's head is usually perceived as a sign of lower credibility (Gainor, 2017) and as a more attractive gesture (Krumhuber, Manstead, & Kappas, 2007). Similarly, women are often expected to smile to be perceived as attractive and kind because patriarchal cultures value women based on physical appearance and friendliness (Gainor, 2017; Krumhuber et al., 2007). Thus, these representations might indicate that female Chinese athletes try to align themselves with the social expectation that women should be kind and beautiful.

Another interesting finding of the current study is that, in contrast to a variety of significant gender differences between male and female Chinese athletes, male and female U.S. athletes did not differ in any self-subordination measure except for body position. This finding is particularly important; considering that only small differences emerged between female Chinese and U.S. athletes, the differences between

male Chinese and U.S. athletes were thus relatively more salient. That is, male U.S. athletes were more likely to show emotion, smile, and include others in their photographs, features that have traditionally been identified as “feminine-oriented” (Gainor, 2017). This finding indicates that, compared to male Chinese athletes, male U.S. athletes were more progressive in transcending gender stereotypes, perhaps indicating that patriarchal social values are weakening in the United States. However, the reasons that male athletes from the two countries significantly differed in self-subordination and female athletes from the two countries shared a variety of characteristics invite further exploration.

In contrast to previous findings that gender differences in facial prominence were strong, the current study found that national differences served more as a silent predictor. U.S. athletes were more likely to show a higher facial ratio than their Chinese counterparts. This difference in facial prominence perhaps reflects the influence of cultural background. According to Hofstede (2001), China is deemed as more collectivistic whereas the United States is seen as more individualistic, in terms of their respective culture. Compared to the former, individuals in the latter tend to be more narcissistic and egocentric (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Na, Kosinski, & Stillwell, 2015). In this sense, Chinese athletes, being less egocentric, might have felt more comfortable being photographed from a distance, whereas U.S. athletes tended to take more photographs that more prominently showed their faces.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study has shed light on gender differences in athlete self-representation from a cross-cultural perspective, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Only two social media platforms (i.e., Sina Weibo and Twitter) were examined, and athlete self-representation might vary on other platforms (e.g., Instagram and WeChat). Future studies could include additional media platforms to generate a more comprehensive understanding of athlete self-portrayal. Also, the current study focused on athlete self-disclosure during the 2016 Rio Olympics and did not include non-Olympic time periods. Even though Athletes might have showcased more athleticism during the Olympics, future studies might reveal different behaviors by looking at different time periods.

This study analyzed the public sites of athletes which might carry a purpose related to athletic professionalism and commercial business of being Olympic athletes. The findings uncovered in this study might not be generalizable to the content that athletes posted on their personal and private sites. Moreover, this study collected 600 pictures from over 110 American athletes’ social media sites, whereas only 72 Chinese athletes’ sites were covered to reach the sample of 600 pictures. Why American athletes—overall—posted fewer pictures than their Chinese counterparts invites future exploration. Furthermore, athletes competing in different sports could present themselves in different ways. For instance, swimmers might present themselves in more revealing

ways because swim suits tend to expose more skin. Future studies could further explore the role that specific sports play in athlete self-representation on social media.

This study uncovered salient national differences in self-representation between Chinese and U.S. athletes, in which Chinese male and female athletes—to a large extent—aligned with the hegemonic gender norms whereas minimal gender differences were uncovered between U.S. male and female athletes. That is, instead of being defined as pure variations between men and women, gender differences in self-representation should be examined and understood within social norms and expectations in a specific cultural context. This study contributes to the current literature by introducing and confirming the important role that nationality plays in the gendered self-portrayal on social media.

From a theoretical perspective, this study suggested that cultural background likely exerts a substantial influence. As socialized human beings, athletes more or less internalize social norms that could influence their perceptions and self-disclosure decisions. In addition, athlete self-representation could be influenced by perceptions of fan and follower expectations, considering that social media is an effective tool for managing an online image or brand. Athletes might intentionally post photographs that please a target audience in order to construct a more favorable image. In this sense, although athletes have gained agency and autonomy in representing themselves on social media, this self-representation is a continual negotiation among personal goals, perceived preferences of target audiences, and cultural expectations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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