Portraying the Female in Sports Tabloids:
How Chinese Sports Media Visualize the Female in Microblog Updates

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Feminist media scholars have long criticized the gender bias in media coverage. Three kinds of stereotypes dominate female images, namely "sex object to sell products to men," "person trying to be beautiful for men," and "wife, mother and housekeeper for men" (Hole & Levine, 1971, p. 249). These stereotypes are widespread in sports media, which is supposed to highlight the physical strength and beauty of human beings without gender bias. Yet, contrary to expectation, sports and sports communication are informed by assumptions from masculinity discourse and patriarchal hierarchy which render "men's sports authentic sports and women's a pale imitation" (Duncan, 2006, p. 236).

There are two primary features of gender bias in sports communication. Marginalization refers to the amount of media coverage of female athletes sportswomen, which is significantly less than for sportsmen (roughly 1/10 of the amount of reports; e.g., Blinde et al, 1991; Jorgensen, 2005; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994). In addition, the stereotypical representation of female athletes means that even when they are covered, they are more likely to be featured in socially accepted ways through sexualization, normalization, and emotionalization of their portrayals. Such stereotypes of female athletes are widely observed in sports communication activities in many Western countries, including the United States (e.g., Billings & Eastman, 2003; Bissell & Duke, 2007; Eastman & Billings , 2000), Britain (Flatten & Matheson, 1996), Spain (Crolley & Teso, 2007), Australia (Jones, 2006; 2013), and New Zealand (McGregor & Fountaine, 1997). Although media research is abundant for these Western cultures, little research has examined the image of female athletes in China.

Unlike their U.S. counterparts who experienced a long struggle to gain the opportunity to engage in sports competitions, Chinese women's participation in sports can be traced back to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The central government encourages female sports, viewing them as a symbol of female participation in social affairs.For example, the Chinese women's volleyball team won the championship in the World Cup, the Olympics, and the Volleyball World Championships for five consecutive years from 1981-1986 and were regarded as national heroines by both the government and the public (Lu, 2007). Therefore, the images of Chinese sportswomen should be different from those of Western female athletes who are stereotypically presented as marginalized, sexualized, and normalized objects. However, after the Chinese reform policy in the late 1970s, Western culture exerted strong influences on Chinese social norms. Chinese sports media follows highly commercial principles targeting the needs of the readership, particularly male readership, by focusing on sexy, attractive, and beautiful females. Therefore, it will be quite interesting to explore the presentation of female images in Chinese sports coverage.

While much research has been conducted on Olympic Games coverage, Eastman and Billings (2000) noted the paucity of research examining the "regular, everyday mediated sports discourse" (p. 192XX). The present research used a content analysis method to examine "everyday" microblog posts from three sports media outlets on Sina Weibo, the largest microblog platform in China, in order to depict the overall presentations of female images in Chinese sports communication in the microblog age.

Literature Review

Despite the increasing number of female athletes and media reporting on female sports, the dominant discourse in sports communication is still under the ideological hegemony of male superiority (Blinde, Greendorfer, & Shanker, 1991) which usually involves the "trivializing, patronizing, and sexualizing" of women (Caple, 2013, p. 272).

A 2005 survey of the international sports press covering 37 newspapers in 10 countries found that 86% of sports news was devoted exclusively to male sports and male athletes (Jorgensen, 2005). Even when female athletes or sports were depicted, they were usually portrayed in feminine stereotypes, emphasizing their physical appearances such as sexuality, beauty, attractiveness, and grace; their characteristics such as chastity and modesty; and their behaviors such as obedience (Brandt & Carstens, 2005). These findings were repeatedly observed in various media outlets including television (e.g., Blinde et al., 1991; Duncan, Messner, & Willams, 1990), newspaper, (e.g., Theberge, 1991; Wann, Schrader, Allison, & McGeorge, 1998), magazines (e.g., Kane, 1988; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994), and Internet reporting (e.g., Jones, 2006) in multiple countries.

Marginalization of Female Athletes in Coverage Amount

Messner (2005) noted that "there is a continuing marginalization, or downright ignoring, of women's sports by the media" (p. 1). This marginalization is demonstrated in the number of news articles and news photographs in print media, the amount of airtime in TV and broadcasting, as well as the amount and prominence of reports in new media outlets.

Coverage of women's sports in six New Zealand newspapers accounted for 12.4% in 1992 and dropped to 4.4% in 1996; whereas the space for men's sports increased from 75.5% to 79.9% (McGregor & Fountaine, 1997). From 1982 to 2002, everyday sports

coverage in the New Zealand press favored males over females by a ratio of 8:1, with just 10% of space devoted to women's sports (Bruce, 2006). In the British press, women were coved in only 7% of all sports news (Flatten & Matheson, 1996).

This underrepresentation was even worse in photographic coverage. Daily newspapers in Canberra, the capital city of Australia, published 12 times as many photographs of men's sports as of women's sports, with women being pictured in only 7.5% of all sports pictures (Menzies, 1989). The ratio of photographs featuring males compared to females was 17:1 in British broadsheets, and 13:1 in U.S. newspapers (Duncan et al., 1990).

A series of studies in the U.S. found the proportion of airtime given to women during televised sports news ranged from 5% to 8.7% (Duncan & Messner, 2000), compared with consistently more than 90% airtime for men on television sports news and highlights shows from 1989 and 2004 (Smith, 2005). In an analysis of ESPN's *Sports Center* and CNN's *Sport's Tonight*, Tuggle (1997) found that only 5% of airtime was devoted to women's sports. In terms of particular sports events, men were featured twice as often as women in NBC's coverage of the 1996 Olympic track and field events (Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003).

Female athletes are also marginalized in new media. A study of three leading U.S. sports websites showed that coverage of male athletes has outstripped that of female athletes by 4:1 (Kachgal, 2001). Four Australian national public broadcasters (*ABC*, *BBC*, *CBC*, and *TVNZ*) favored male athletes by a margin of four to one in the 2008 Olympic Games. In particular, leading stories and photographs on the websites' splash pages portrayed men's achievements twice as often as women's success (Jones, 2013).

However, other researchers have reported a counter trend of an increasing amount of female sports coverage worldwide. For example, a cross-national study of 1996 Olympics reporting found that females received 43% of all photographs in six U.S., U.K., and Canadian newspapers (Vincent, Imwold, Masemann, & Johnson, 2002). Another study of five U.S. newspapers reported that 48% of the coverage in the 2000 Olympics was devoted to female athletes, which compared favorably with the demographics for the U.S. Olympic team (55% males and 45% females; Hardin, Chance, Dodd, & Hardin, 2002). Thus, there is a mixed result regarding the marginalization of the female athletes in terms of the amount of sports. Yet, scholars argued that even when the trend of underrepresentation of women in sports media was changed, as long as the patriarchic discourses used in news reports, which is ubiquitous, stable and invisible, remained, female athletes still discriminated in sports media coverage.

Feminine Stereotypes

Sexualization. The American mainstream culture has formulated a particular norms about the constituent qualities of masculinity and femininity. In general, the components of masculinity include competitiveness, strength, self-control, stamina, discipline, fearlessness, and aggression, and thewhile qualities that are considered to be inherent to femininity are beauty, grace, passivity, emotion, and expressiveness (Banet-Weiser, 2002). Such stereotypes are ubiquitous in sports communication.

When females are pictured in sports coverage, they are overwhelmingly depicted in light of socially accepted stereotypes of femininity, such as "sex object," "person trying to be beautiful for men," and "wife and mother" (Brandt & Carstens, 2005, p. 236). Because sports have been defined as masculine, women engaging in sports are invading

men's field, which thereby violates the social expectation of a clear, impassible boundary between the genders. Thus, women have to showcase their feminine qualities rather than their athletic ability so as to balance the distorted, blurred gender boundaries in the sports contexts. These feminine qualities include sexuality/attractiveness, emotionality, and heterosexuality, and highlighting these qualities implies that the female athlete's gender is more salient than her athleticism (Knight & Giuliano, 2001).

Female images in sports are overwhelmingly sexualized, featuring poses with sexual connotations, showing "forbidden" sights or resembling soft-core pornography (see Jones, 2006, p. 114). Bissell and Duke (2007) argued that the ideal image of female athletes has undergone a change from the "girl-next-door" to sexually attractive. A large proportion of chest and buttock shots were used in the televised broadcasts of women's beach volleyball during the 2004 Olympic Games, emphasizing the athletes' "sexual difference, sexuality, and feminine characteristics" (Bissell & Duke, 2007, p. 49). In addition, sports magazines for men and women both prefer to remove female athletes from the athletic arena and portray them with styled hair, delicate makeup, and feminine dresses (Fink & Kensicki, 2002).

Some scholars argue that the overwhelmingly sexualized portrayal of female athletes is a means to either protect the female athlete from being rejected by the public, or to give the public what the media outlets think they want (Kane, 1996). Official institutions and official promotional material use high levels of sexuality appeals to promote the athletes to the public. For example, Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) president Joseph S. Baker suggested that female soccer players should consider wearing more revealing uniforms to bring increased interest and attention

to the game (Millward, 2004, para. 2). An analysis of more than 600 promotional announcements aired in U.S. prime-time by ABC, CBS, and NBC during one week of the 1984 television season found that over 25% promotions contained sensuality expressed in either actions or words (Brown, 1989). The use of sex to market and promote female athletes and sports was particularly notable during the 2004 Summer Olympics (Bissell & Duke, 2007). Many famous female athletes were featured in men's magazines "posing provocatively in Victoria's Secret-meets-the-*Sports-Illustrated*-swimsuit-issue fashion" in the months before the Olympic Games (Dillman, 2004, para. 1). Ironically, even though such promotions did not focus on sports or athleticism, many female athletes received a tremendous amount of attention prior to, during, and after the Olympic Games partially due to the sexualized marketing.

Normalization. Female athletes were normalized either by depicting their feminine appearances of beauty and attractiveness or by emphasizing their feminine roles as wives/girlfriends and mothers. Women usually get more coverage "if they are physically attractive and scantily clad, which tends to deemphasize their athletic prowess" (Bissell & Duke, 2007, pp. 49-50). Media outlets favor pretty or sexually attractive sportswomen and picture them more often than less pretty and less glamorous female athletes (Bernstein & Galily, 2008; Jones, 2006). In coverage of the 1996 Olympic Games, commentators tended to emphasize the athletic victories of men and the family life and attractiveness of women (Eastman & Billings, 1999).

"Apart from wearing ribbons, ponytails, make-up and dresses," the normalization efforts also includes "making statements in interviews about their boyfriends, husbands and children, and/or about wanting to settle down eventually if not yet married" (Coakley,

1998, p. 238). By continually referring to women's marital, relationship, and family status, media helps to reassure audiences of female athletes' heterosexual priorities (Stevenson, 2002).

Sports magazines particularly preferred personal stories about female athletes. For example, in *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*, an article about WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes did not focus on her playing ability, but rather on her decisions to turn down an invitation from the U.S. National Team and to stay home with her 2-year-old son. Another article about Stacy Dagila, the top U.S. women's pole vaulter, devoted a large portion of space to describing how female pole vaulters competed in swimsuits to make the event more "interesting" for the audience. An article about triathlon champion Karen Smyers detailed her fight with breast cancer rather than focusing on her athletic accomplishments. These reports removed the female athletes from the sports context and highlighted their femininity by constructing a family/daily context which "serves to reinforce the socially constructed, appropriate gender roles to which normal women should aspire" (Fink & Kensicki, 2002, p. 331).

Emotionalization. Female athletes are often featured with emotional expressions, implying the vulnerability and weakness of femininity. Emotional displays, such as tears and distress, portray women as passive participants in sports and confirm the stereotype of women as more prone to emotional outbursts and less able to handle the stress of sports (Borcila, 2000).

Affectional facial expressions of emotions can be detected by analyzing the position/shape of eyebrows, lips, and eyes and the degree of tension in the facial musculature (Caple, 2013). In an analysis of the 1996 *Australian Sports Commission*

report, Phillips (1996) found that emotions were stressed in the reporting of sportswomen, while sportsmen display little emotion but were applauded for their toughness. Furthermore, female athletes were depicted as more vulnerable to injury, more emotional, more prone to stress, and less focused than male athletes in reports of 1996 Olympics (Borcila, 2000). Crolley and Teso (2007) also noted a strong focus on emotion in sportswomen in Spanish media. However, in a study of the portrayal of female athletes in the Australian news media, extreme emotional responses were largely absent in sports reports. The majority of cases portrayed females were smiling or happy (58%), or serious and focused on their sports activities (39%). No images portrayed females in tears (Caple, 2013) .

Gender-appropriateness

Individual vs. team sports. The masculine hegemony in sports is reinforced through the tacit categorizations of "gender-appropriate" sports. According to Greer, Hardin, and Homan (2009), team sports with an element of body contact, such as basketball, soccer, and football, are deemed masculine. In contrast, sports focusing on individual performance and judged by aesthetics, such as gymnastics and figure skating, were rated as feminine (Koivula, 2001; Pedersen, 2003). A range of individual sports that do not involve body contact but are not judged by aesthetics, such as track and field and tennis, are rated as neutral because they allowed athletes to perform in ways that do not strongly violate gender norms (Koivula, 2001; Riemer & Feltz, 1995). However, such "gender-neutral" sports still involved skill and are usually attributed as favoring men (Greer et al., 2009).

There has been a great deal of documentation of the close relationship between media coverage of individual/team sports and athletes' gender. For example, Tuggle and Owen (1999) examined broadcasts of the 1996 Summer Olympics and found that although women did receive extensive coverage time, 61% of women's coverage was devoted to the individual sports of swimming, diving, and gymnastics, and little coverage focused on women's team sports such as soccer and basketball. A similar pattern was observed in the 2004 Olympics reporting, in which women competing in individual sports were three times more likely to be photographed than those competing in team sports. In contrast, the ratio of pictures of men's team sports and individual sports was 2:1 (Jones, 2006). Jones argued that "such exclusive representation suggests female team sports are not yet accepted as legitimate contests worthy of whole of team coverage" (p. 124).

Female- vs. male-appropriate sports. Some scholars argue that individual/team sports cannot accurately reflect gender bias in sports communication. For example, individual sports such as boxing and wrestling are regarded as typical male sports. Many track and field events that do not feature physical contact, such as shot put, discus, and javelin, are not accepted as female-appropriate because they emphasized overt displays of strength (Greer et al, 2009). Correspondingly, female Olympians in these events usually did not appear in prime-time coverage (Tuggle, Huffman, & Rosengard, 2002).

Therefore, the categorization for identifying the gender-appropriateness of sports should mainly rely on the judgment standards (Greer et al., 2009). Sports that display female characteristics and are judged by aesthetic standards of beauty, grace, and charisma are rated as female-appropriated sports. In contrast, sports that exhibit

masculine characteristics such as stamina, discipline, competitive spirit, and aggression and are judged by speed, strength, and levels of body contact are rated as male-appropriate sports (Banet-Weiser, 2002; Koivula, 2001).

Previous research on sports communication demonstrated a clear pattern that favoring the particular gender in the corresponding gender-appropriate sports. Media coverage of women participating in female-appropriate sports was much more prevalent compared to the coverage of male-appropriate sports (Bissell & Duke, 2007). News reports on the 2000 Olympic events in male-appropriate sports involving power or contact, force over an opponent, or unpenalized body contact featured more men than women (Tuggle et al., 2002). In *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*, 65% of the females covered were participating in female-appropriate sports, 19% in female-inappropriate sports, and 16% in the neutral sports category (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). The ratio of pictures of female athletes in female-appropriate and male-appropriate sports was 3:2 in *ABC News Online*'s reports of the 2004 Olympics (Jones, 2006). This gender-appropriate sports communication pattern was even found in newspaper coverage of interscholastic sports, in which girls in neutral or female-appropriate sports received more coverage than those in "masculine" sports (Pedersen, 2003).

Active vs. passive participation. The print media have perpetuated sexual differences by portraying female athletes as passive participants in sports (Hardin et al., 2002) because passive females reinforce the stereotypes of women as "sexually different—neither powerful nor capable of doing extraordinary things" (Jones, 2013, p. 244). With regard to the analysis of the visuals, Jones (2006) defined active actions as featuring objects as "competing in or about to compete in their sport" and defined passive

actions as featuring objects as "motionless, typically from the neck up, posing for the camera, or celebrating" (p. 116).

George, Hartley, and Paris (2001) found that the British media gave preference to male action shots (78% of male photographs) over female action shots (52%), and females were twice as likely as males to be shown in passive shots. Compared with the 2000 Olympics coverage, the number of passive women in *ABC News Online*'s 2004 Olympics reports increased by 191%, which was more than twice the increase of passive male images in the same period (Jones, 2006). For pictured female athletes, active female competitors were featured five times more than passive female participants. However, although 60% of female athletes were in active shots, they were more often depicted as losers than were men and were usually presented as expressing passive emotions (Jones, 2006).

Nevertheless, other researchers have reported opposite findings. For example, Kinnick (1998) observed that females (58.4%) were more likely to be depicted engaging in their sport than males (52.7%) and were slightly less likely to be depicted in passive positions; four national broadcast media in Australia featured more active women (21%) than passive women (18%), but portrayed more passive men (34%) than active men (27%) (Jones, 2013). Daily sports communication in top sports magazines also favored active female athletes than passive females in US (Fink & Kensicki, 2002).

Stereotypical Images of Other Females in Sports Communication

In addition to female athletes, other women such as cheerleaders, male athletes' wives/girlfriends, and even beautiful female audience members or fans have gained news coverage in recent years (Grindstaff & West, 2011). Nevertheless, little research has

focused on these females who are portrayed in side-stories or sports tabloids and who are even more predominantly framed as sex objects and/or wives/mothers.

Historically, cheerleading was an exclusively masculine domain when it emerged in the 1880s. Starting from the 1920s and 1930s, women joined the cheerleading domain. Thereafter, attractiveness and sex appeal replaced popularity and leadership as key criteria for participation (Grindstaff & West, 2011; Hanson, 1995). Grindstaff and West argued that cheerleaders symbolized the ideal of middle-class female whiteness: "healthy, attractive but wholesome and virginal, popular, and through her cheerleading signals a supportive, nurturing disposition . . . prescribing her future role as supporter of her husband's responsibilities and successes in public life" (p. 2). This stereotype was further legitimated by televised college (and later high school) cheerleading competitions which pervasively featured female cheerleaders with feminine bodies paired with large, strong men (Grindstaff & West, 2011). To quote Douglas (2010), "it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace" (p. 10).

Given the scant literature about non-athlete female images, the current research examined the identities of all pictured females in Chinese sports media microblog coverage. The following research questions were raised:

RQ1: How are females visually sexualized in sport media microblog posts?

RQ2a: How are females visually glamorized in terms of the use of makeup in sport media microblog posts?

RQ2b: How are females visually glamorized in terms of the use of accessories in sport media microblog posts?

RQ2c: How are females visually contextualized in sports media microblog posts?

RQ2d: How are females visually emotionalized in sports media microblog posts?

RQ3a: How are females featured in terms of individual/team sports in sports media microblog posts?

RQ3b: How are females featured in terms of female- or male-appropriate sports in sports media microblog posts?

RQ3c: How are females featured in terms of active/passive participation in sports media microblog posts?

Methodology

Three microblog accounts were sampled from Sina Weibo: *CCTV-5*, the most popular sports TV channel in China; *Sina Sports*, the most popular sports news website in China; and *Hupu.com*, the most popular online sports forum in China. Because the purpose of the research was to analyze the visual presentation of female images, only posts featuring pictures of females during the month of March 2014 were accessed. A total of 267 microblog posts were sampled.

Coding Categories

For each picture, the following information was coded:

Identity of the female was coded according to verbal and visual cues, with female athletes = 1, male athletes' related others (e.g., wife, girlfriend, relative) = 2, audience/fan = 3, public figure/celebrity = 4, cheerleader = 5, and other = 6[1].

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[1] If the same object had multiple identities, such as being both a public figure (coded = 4) and male athletes' wife (code = 2), this was coded according to the context she appeared. If it is hard to categorize by the

Degree of sexualization was operationalized into two constructs: *dressing status* and *posing status*. Dressing status was coded according to the amount of nakedness: body with face, arms, or under knee uncovered = 1, with neck, half breast, or thighs uncovered = 2, wearing a bikini = 3, and almost naked (or wearing transparent clothing) or fully naked = 4. In some circumstances, people wearing similar dresses might have different degree of sexuality depending on the contexts. For example, swimming athletes and models might all wear bikinis, but the model might be purposively posed to convey the sexual appeal. Therefore, posing status was used as a supplemental factor, coded as: sports pose = 1, everyday pose = 2, and sexual pose = 3.

Degree of normalization was operationalized into three constructs: *glamorization*, *contextualization*, and *emotionalization*. *Glamorization* was coded by two indicators: the use of makeup was coded as no makeup or light makeup = 1, obvious makeup = 2, and can't tell = 3; and the use of accessories[2] was coded as no accessory = 1, sports accessory = 2, less than two feminine accessories = 3, more than two feminine accessories = 4, and can't tell = 5.

Contexualization was coded by the scenes where the female was featured, with game/training = 1, daily life = 2, public activities = 3, media photographs = 4, and can't tell = 5.

Emotionalization was coded according to the facial features of the female objects, with positive (e.g., happy, smiling, enjoying) = 1, neutral (e.g., calm, determined) = 2, and negative (e.g., sad, fearful, scared, in tears) = 3.

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context, the smaller number has higher priorities than larger number. In the above case, she would be coded as 2.

[2] Sports accessories, such as sweatband, wristband, hats, watches; feminine accessories, such as ear rings, necklace, jewelry.

Sports types were recorded as the exact name of sports, such as soccer, basketball, tennis, and so forth, or non-relevant. It was further recoded into two categories: individual/team sports and female/male appropriate sports. *Individual/team sport* was coded according to the number of athletes participating. Sports featuring one person and judged based on individual performance were coded as individual sports (e.g., gymnastics, diving, figure skating, figuring swimming); sports with competing teams of more than two people on each side were coded as team sports (e.g., basketball, volleyball, soccer, football); sports featuring team competition but with fewer than two persons one each side (e.g., tennis, table tennis, fencing) or sports featuring more than five persons but without team competition (e.g., track and field) were coded as neutral sports.

Female/male sport was coded according to the sports' standard of judgment. Sports judged by aesthetic standards of beauty, grace, and charisma were coded as female-appropriate sports; sports judged by strength and levels of body contact were rated as male-appropriate sports; sports judged by speed and skill were coded as neutral sports.

Active/passive participation of the female was coded according to the moving status of the female objects, with active = 1, passive = 2, and can't tell = 3.

Intercoder Reliability

Two graduate student coders were trained and performed the coding on a random sample of 60 posts in March 2014. The final intercoder reliability was .93 using Cohen's kappa, with a range from .81 (glamorization) to .97 (dressing status).

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Results

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A total of 267 microblog posts were sampled, with 95 (35.6%) from *CCTV-5*, 125 (46.8%) from *Sina Sports*, and 47 (17.6%) from *Hupu Sports*[3]. The majority of the women pictured were identified as female athletes (59.3%), followed by male athletes' related persons (13.3%). Celebrities (9.1%), others (9.1%), audience members or fans (8.0%), and cheerleaders (0.1%) were not presented very frequently.

RQ1 examined the sexualization of female images in sports media microblog posts. As Table 1 indicates, the posts did not feature highly sexualized female images. Both dressing ($\chi^2 = 55.56$, $p < .001$) and posing status ($\chi^2 = 62.40$, $p < .001$) varied by the identities of female objects. Most female athletes, audience members, and celebrities were portrayed as fully covered or wearing shorts. Only a few very sexy objects were pictured in underwear/bikini or fully naked. This category contained 23.3% female athletes and 36.7% male athletes' wives/girlfriends. However, female athletes in with beast or thigh might due to the particular type of sports that she was engaged, such diving, figure skating, or gymnastics. In these conditions, the sexualization was different from conditions when females were purposively sexlized. Therefore, a further analysis was done examining the images of sports women in bikini, half naked, and/or almost all naked. Results showed less than 30% were in game training contexts, 42.9% were featured in public activities, and 14.3% were being photographed for media outlets. This means that most female athletes wearing shorts were not doing so due to sports needs but due to media needs.

[3]*CCTV5* and *Sina Sports* are content producers who report news, but *Hupu* is an online sports forum which attracts a large amount of sports fans. The nature of a forum might lead to the low update frequency of *Hupu Sports*'s compared with the other two microblog accounts. However, the number of followers of the three accounts is comparable, which provides a solid base for the sampling.

Female athletes were least likely to be portrayed in sexual and everyday poses, and most likely to be pictured in sports poses. This finding was different from the overt sexlialization of female athletes in the Western contexts. Furthermore, male athletes' wives/girlfriends were the most likely to be featured in sexual poses. All audience members and most celebrities and "other" females were shown in "everyday" poses.

The degree of sexuality of female images in Chinese sports microblog posts was not very high. Female athletes, audience members, and most celebrities were featured in everyday poses fully covered or in shorts, but male athletes' wives/friends and a small portion of female athletes were purposively presented in a way that emphasized their sexuality in terms of both dressing and posing status.

RQ2 examined the normalization of female images in sports microblogs. Descriptive data shows that sports microblogs did not heavily normalize the female. The majority of the pictured women used no or light makeup, with no accessories or less than two feminine accessories. Most displayed neutral or positive emotions in active rather than passive moving status. Chi-square analyses showed that glamorization, measured by the use of makeup ($\chi^2 = 76.67$, $p < .001$) and accessories ($\chi^2 = 69.13$, $p < .001$) as well as contextualization ($\chi^2 = 125.65$, $p < .001$) significantly varied by the identity of female subjects, and emotionalization ($\chi^2 = 15.60$, $p < .05$) was slightly differentiated by the female subjects' identities. Unlike previous research in Western societies (e.g., U.S., UK, Australia), most Chinese females athletes were portrayed wearing no/light makeup, no accessories, in game/training contexts, and with passive or neutral emotional status. By contrast, male athletes' wives/girlfriends, audience members, and celebrities were subjected to sexualization and were also more likely to be portrayed in the context of

daily life or public activities, with obvious makeup and feminine accessories which emphasized their feminine characteristics. In particular, male athletes' wives/girlfriends ranked the highest in the use of feminine accessories and in the context of professional photographs.

In sum, Chinese female athletes were not strongly normalized by exhibiting their sexual, feminine, and emotional aspects, though such normalized presentations were applied in depicting other females in the sports context.

There were some interesting patterns in sports types. Among the 267 posts, 29 displayed non-sports scenes. For the 238 posts with specific sports types, tennis (15.7%), soccer (13.9%), basketball (10.9%), and figure skating (10.1%) were the most featured sports, followed by table tennis (7.5%), volleyball (6.7%), badminton (4.5%), and gymnastics (4.5%). All the other types of sports were pictured around 1%. Weight lifting (0.7%) is the least featured sports type that portrayed females. These numbers, however, include not just female athletes, but all female objects. Further analysis showed that female athletes were most likely to be portrayed in tennis (25.2%), figure skating (17.0%), table tennis (10.7%) and volleyball (10.1%). Male athletes' wives/girlfriends were more likely to be pictured in sccer (40.0%) and basketball (17.1%). Female audience members were featured in only two sports: soccer (61.9%) and basketball (38.1%).

RQ3a examined the relationship between female identities and the featuring of individual/team sports. Results of a Chi-square analysis found that female athletes were most likely to be portrayed in neutral sports and least likely to be portrayed in team sports, compared with all the other identities of females, particularly male athletes'

wives/girlfriends and audience who were overwhelmingly featured in the context of team sports ($\chi^2 = 67.00$, $p < .001$).

A similar pattern was observed in the relationship between female identities and the featuring of female/male appropriate sports in RQ3b ($\chi^2 = 77.59$, $p < .001$). Female athletes were most likely to be portrayed in neutral sports and were least likely to be portrayed in male-appropriate sports compared with all the other identities of females who were overwhelmingly featured in male-appropriate sports.

Chinese female athletes were more likely to be featured in neutral sports than in individual or female-appropriate sports. This might reflect the comparatively lower gender bias toward female athletes in China. However, females in other identity categories, particularly male athletes' wives/girlfriends and female audience members, were more likely to play supportive roles through being portrayed in relation to male-dominated sports.

RQ3c asked about the relationship between female identities and the featuring of active/passive participation. The result of chi-square analysis found that female athletes and celebrities were more likely to be featured in active status, whereas male athletes' wives/girlfriends and female audience members were more often portrayed as passive ($\chi^2 = 32.37$, $p < .001$). The results might imply a tendency to feature female athletes as active performers, while male athletes' wives/girlfriends and female audience members were passive observers.

Discussion

The current research analyzed the visual presentations of female images in Chinese sports media microblog posts. Two major patterns were observed: first, Chinese

female athletes were not portrayed under the Western stereotypes of women; second, the traditional female roles were undertaken by non-athlete females, primarily male athletes' wives/girlfriends and female audience members/fans.

The Neutral Image of Chinese Female Athletes

Previous research about Western media reports usually criticize the stereotypical representation of female athletes in which they are portrayed with traditional conceptions of femininity, such as emphasizing their sexual features, roles as wives and mothers, emotional vulnerability, or their participation in gender-appropriate sports exhibiting grace and glamour rather than strength and muscularity. Yet, few of the above phenomena were found in Chinese sports media microblog activities. Instead, most female athletes were in no or light makeup, wearing no accessories or only sports accessories (such as sweatband, wristband, hats, watches) and were fully covered or in shorts. They were usually captured in sports poses in game/training contexts, with neutral or positive emotions. Although a slight gender difference was found regarding the types of sports in that Chinese female athletes were rarely featured in team or male-appropriate sports such as soccer and basketball, they were not featured in individual or female-appropriate sports very often either. Instead, they appeared frequently in neutral sports, such as tennis, table tennis, and volleyball.

Therefore, the heavy gender stereotypes in sports coverage of female athletes in the Western context are not found in this study. This might reflect the different gender views between China and Western society. The Western mainstream culture has a stable, traditional view of middle-class females, including key factors such as attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality (Knight & Giuliano, 2001). Traditional

Chinese culture also has a set of standards for the ideal female, the key factors of which include "humility, resignation, subservience, self-abasement, obedience, cleanliness, and industry" (Ebrey, 2014, para. 6). However, the establishment of the People's Republic of China changed the traditional lives that Chinese women have been living for thousands of year. Chinese female participation in labor force (The World Bank, 2014), politics and government (Howell, 2002) all rank relatively high. For professional women who "hold up half the sky" in China, their professional identities, rather than gender characteristics are prominent in China today.

This is the social background of Chinese sportswomen, who are professional athletes first and women second in the public view. Although it demonstrated some gender bias such as being reluctant to portray females in more masculine games such as basketball and soccer, Chinese sports media did not strongly associate sportswomen with female-appropriate sports. A further examination suggested that sports microblog posts featured Chinese female athletes in the sports types in which they got the best achievement, including tennis, figure skating, table tennis, and volleyball. This implies that sports media emphasized rather than diminished sportswomen's athleticism. However, the present data did not contain the category of achievement, and thus was not enough to support this speculation. The data also cannot fully explain why Chinese female athletes were absent in some masculine games in which they also have excellent achievement, such as soccer, speed skating, weight lifting, and so on. This might imply an in-between position between Westernized gender-appropriate presentation and Chinese women's professionalism.

Normalization of Side-Supporters and Alienation of Female Athletes

In contrast to the relatively professional, neutral, independent image of female athletes, all other women, particularly male athletes' wives/girlfriends and female audience members, played stereotypical feminine roles. They were sexual, glamorized, emotional, and passive, with all female audience members and most male athletes' wives/girlfriends featured in the context of male-appropriate sports. The visual presentation of the non-athlete females showed a group pattern as sportsmen's sideline supporters.

It was reasonable that male athletes' wives/girlfriends appeared in typical feminine ways because the reason they were featured in sports news was due to their affiliated identities. Yet, it was interesting that all female audience members were found in team/male-appropriate sports. The absence of female audience members for female sports implied that female fans are only interested in male sports. The presence of stereotypical females highlighted the masculinity of men's sports. When non-athlete females were portrayed, the focus points were not sports-related characteristics, such as being healthy, active, and energetic, but rather typical feminine characteristics, particularly in terms of glamorization, emotionalization, and passive status. It seems that their images were closer to the Western stereotypes of sexuality and attractiveness rather than to the Chinese traditions, such as conservativeness and self-abasement.

This finding is even more interesting if these images are compared with the professional images of female athletes in the same media platform. It seems that sports microblogs portrayed "new Chinese" images of the female athletes, and "traditional Western" images of non-athlete females. Contrary to the discourse of normalization, this might show an effort to alienate female athletes, that is, to portray female athletes as

being outside of the "normal" female group, although the side-supporter role of the non-athlete females is also abnormal if judged by Chinese tradition. Furthermore, this alienation trend was persistent even when female athletes were removed from the sports contexts. Once featured in the contexts of daily life, public activity, and media photographs, the degree of female athletes' use of glamorization, accessories, and display of emotion were all less than for non-athlete female groups.

Limitations and Further Research

There are several limitations of the present research. First, due to the limited time window of the research, only 267 microblog posts were sampled. The small sample size and short time span limited the generalization of conclusions to bigger samples and to longer time intervals. The investigators are continuing the study by collecting more data so as to increase the generalizability of the research. Second, this study analyzed only three sports media outlets' microblog posts. Therefore, the results might not be able to represent the overall conditions of all sports media microblog activities, nor the overall conditions of all sports media communication patterns. Further research should explore multiple media platforms to retest the conclusion of the current research. Thirdly, only female images were examined. Most of the literature focuses on comparisons between male and female athletes. If the images of both genders were examined, the results would be more consistent with the literature review and will be more comparable with previous research in the Western media context. Finally, not all data fit in the two patterns in the conclusion. The present research provides a plausible interpretation based on the data, but further confirmation across various media platforms and under multiple sports contexts is still needed.

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Table 1 *Visual presentation of female images by identity*

	Athletes	Athletes-related others	Audience	Celebrities	Others	Total	χ^2
Dressing Status							61.26***
Fully coved	90(57.7%)	15(42.9%)	19(90.5%)	15(62.5%)	10(37.0%)	149(56.7%)	
Short	60(38.5%)	9(25.7%)	1(4.8%)	8(33.3%)	6(22.2%)	84(31.9)	
Bikini	6(3.8%)	10(28.6)	1(4.8%)	1(4.2%)	9(33.3%)	27(10.3%)	
(Almost) naked	0(0.0%)	1(2.9%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	2(7.4%)	3(1.1%)	
Posing status							64.31***
Sports poses	66(42.3%)	1(2.9%)	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)	5(18.5%)	74(28.1)	
Sexual poses	1(0.6%)	7(20.2%)	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)	1(3.7%)	11(4.2%)	
Daily poses	89(57.1%)	27(77.1%)	21(100.0%)	20(83.3%)	21(77.8%)	178(67.7%)	
Glamorization							72.65***
No/light makeup	114(73.1%)	12(34.3%)	6(28.6%)	6(25.0%)	9(33.3%)	147(55.9%)	
Obvious makeup	40(25.6%)	20(57.1%)	12(57.1%)	16(66.7%)	9(33.3%)	97(36.9%)	
Can't tell	2(13.%)	3(8.5%)	3(14.3%)	2(8.3%)	9(33.3%)	19(7.2%)	
Accessory							66.76***
No accessory	90(57.7%)	13(37.1%)	6(28.6%)	13(54.2%)	15(55.6%)	137(52.1%)	
Sports accessory	28(17.9)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)	2(7.4%)	32(12.2%)	
<2 feminine accessory	37(23.7)	16(45.7%)	14(66.7%)	8(33.3%)	5(18.5%)	80(30.4%)	
>2 feminine accessories	1(0.6%)	4(11.4%)	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)	1(3.7%)	7(2.7%)	
Can't tell	0(0.0%)	2(5.7%)	1(4.8%)	0(0.0%)	4(14.8%)	7(2.7%)	
Contextulization							127.66***
Game/training	94(60.3%)	7(20.0%)	10(47.6%)	1(4.2%)	2(7.4%)	114(34.3%)	
Daily life	20(12.8%)	15(42.9%)	11(52.4%)	2(8.3%)	13(48.1%)	61(23.2%)	
Ritual	34(21.8%)	5(14.3%)	0(0.0%)	19(79.2%)	4(14.8%)	62(23.6%)	
Photograph	7(4.5%)	7(20.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)	5(18.5%)	20(7.6%)	
Others	1(0.6%)	1(2.9%)	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)	3(11.1%)	6(2.3%)	
Emotionalization							15.66*
Positive	67(42.9%)	18(51.4%)	15(71.4%)	11(45.8%)	7(24.9%)	118(44.9%)	
Neutral	84(53.8%)	16(54.7%)	4(19.0%)	13(54.2%)	19(70.4%)	136(51.7%)	
Negative	5(3.2%)	1(2.9%)	2(9.5%)	0(0.0%)	1(3.7%)	9(3.4%)	
Individual/team sports							67.00***
Individual	39(25.2%)	3(8.8%)	0(0%)	2(12.5%)	0(0%)	44(18.8%)	
Team	32(20.6%)	21(61.8%)	21(100%)	8(50.0%)	5(62.5%)	87(37.2%)	
Neutral	84(54.2%)	10(9.7%)	0(%)	6(37.5%)	3(2.9%)	103(44. 0%)	
Female/male sport							77.59***
Female appropriate	39(25.2%)	3(8.8%)	0(0%)	2(12.5%)	0(0%)	44(18.8%)	
Male appropriate	24(19.4%)	24(70. 6%)	21(100.0%)	9(56.3%)	5(62.5%)	89(38.0%)	
Neutral	7(55.5%)	7(20.6%)	0(%)	5(31.3%)	3(37.5%)	101(43.2%)	
Active/Passive							32.37***
Active	110 (70.5%)	12(34.3%)	5(23.8%)	19(79.2%)	15(55.6%)	161(61.2%)	
Passive	46 (29.5%)	23(65.7%)	16(76.2%)	5(20.8%)	12(44.4%)	102(38.8%)	

***p <. 001, ** p < .01, *p < .05.