

# The impact of media image shaping of sports idols on adolescents' health

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**Abstract:** Adolescents in their quest for self-discovery urgently need an idol to help construct their self-identity. Sports idols, with their spirit of striving for excellence and charismatic personalities, are pursued and admired by teenagers, exerting a significant and profound influence on their growth. Due to the rapid development of mass media, the image shaping of sports idols is inseparable from the media, which presents different characteristics when shaping the media image of sports idols between commercial and public interests, thus having varying impacts, both positive and negative, on teenagers. To shape a positive media image of sports idols, governments and related departments should not only improve athletes' tactical levels but also cultivate their comprehensive qualities; mass media should be aware of their social responsibility and shape a positive image of sports idols; sports idol teams need to communicate with the media and manage their own image well; schools and families, in this process, should reasonably guide teenagers to rationally worship sports idols.

**Keywords:** Sports Idols, Media Image, Media Shaping, Adolescent Health

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new century, Chinese sports have seen rapid development, and sports have increasingly become an important part of people's lives. Athletes with excellent performance and distinctive personalities have also entered the view of teenagers who love exciting sports events, becoming idols for many young people. Idol worship is very common and normal during the special period of individual adolescence and plays a significant role in the physical and mental development of individuals. Under the rapidly developing media ecological environment, the media shaping of sports idols has a profound impact on teenagers. How can the exemplary role of sports idols be better utilized? How can sports idols play a more positive role in the psychological health and growth of teenagers? This poses a severe challenge to all sectors of society.

## 2. Sports idols

Since the new century, with the deepening of China's opening up to the outside world, competitions such as the Olympic Games, the World Cup, the Australian Open, the French Open, the Bundesliga, the English Premier League, and the NBA have gradually been introduced to China. Coupled with the dissemination of television and internet media, these events have quickly and conveniently entered the field of vision of teenagers. The sports stars born from these competitions, such as Liu Xiang, Li Na, Yao Ming, Usain Bolt, Lionel Messi, Kobe Bryant, and other athletes, have become idols worshipped by many teenagers with their excellent competition results and unique personal charm, and they have an important impact on the physical and psychological growth and development of teenagers.

### 2.1. Definition of sports idols

Xu Ying wen believes that a sports idol refers to outstanding individuals in the field of sports who possess exceptional athletic skills and have achieved remarkable results, and are widely known to the public, primarily referring to athletes and coaches. As a special group, sports idols are products of the market and history. They possess potential cultural, spiritual, and commercial values. Sports idols stand out on the sports stage with their superior skills, good qualities, and excellent achievements, contributing to the

development of sports [1]. Due to their outstanding performance in the sports field, they are often loved by the public, especially teenagers who enjoy sports, leading to admiration. According to a survey by Yue Xiaodong, the idols worshipped by Chinese teenagers are mainly stars from the entertainment and sports industries [9].

## 2.2. Characteristics of sports idols

The overall characteristics of sports idols are mainly manifested in four aspects:

### 2.2.1. Outstanding athletic ability and exceptional sports achievements

People are accustomed to admiring those with great power, and sports idols are often the best in their respective fields. National sports idols like Li Na and Liu Xiang are admired by teenagers primarily because they have demonstrated excellent technical levels on the international stage and have reached the pinnacle of their respective sports.

### 2.2.2. Aesthetic physique and a positive, sunny demeanor

Sports idols, after years of athletic training, have a fit body, a sunny disposition, and a positive and uplifting spirit, which easily attract people's attention.

### 2.2.3. Tenacious fighting spirit and noble sportsmanship

Sports idols stand out in competitions not only because of their superb athletic skills but more importantly, their unyielding, tenacious, and never-give-up spirit. For example, the NBA's legendary hero Michael Jordan, who played through illness and made game-winning shots, leading the Bulls to victory time and time again, is truly admirable. Additionally, athletes' noble sportsmanship, such as showing courtesy to opponents, unity, and striving for excellence, also takes root in the hearts of teenagers.

### 2.2.4. Unique personal charisma

Teenagers often prefer to be different, and today's sports idols typically possess unique personal charisma. For example, Kobe Bryant had exceptional talent along with a rebellious personality, Li Na is known for her humor and optimism, and Messi is recognized for his humility and composure.

## 3. Adoration of sports idols by adolescents

The formation of a person's worldview, values, and outlook on life often occurs during adolescence. During this period, teenagers have a strong curiosity and desire to explore the outside world. However, due to a lack of social experience and psychological maturity, their discernment and judgment abilities are often inadequate. As a result, they urgently need to find a role model to imitate, which helps them construct their self-identity. Sports stars, with their outstanding athletic achievements, fit physiques, sunny dispositions, and distinctive personalities, are easily favored by teenagers and often become the idols they admire.

### 3.1. Reasons for adolescent sports idol worship

#### 3.1.1. Adolescent idol worship and the search for self-identity

According to Erikson's perspective, individuals begin the pursuit of self-identity from the moment of birth, with a more urgent and intense search during adolescence than at other stages of life. They use the external environment to ascertain their identity, desiring self-identification while also eagerly hoping to break free from the influence of adults, especially parents and teachers with whom they have close relationships. They urgently need images they like and identify with to guide themselves, and idols provide a reference paradigm for adolescents. Idol worship is a natural, universal, and normal phenomenon in the growth process of individuals, an expression of the psychological culture of this specific age stage of adolescents, and a special developmental stage as they gradually move from immaturity to maturity. Adolescent idol worship is a byproduct of this psychological journey [2]. Idol worship is an important medium for adolescents to integrate into society and explore their identity during this period, with both advantages and disadvantages, and should be viewed correctly. Moderate idol worship is beneficial for the establishment of a stable and appropriate sense of self-identity in adolescents.

#### 3.1.2. Bandura's perspective on adolescent idol worship and social learning behavior

According to Bandura, human behavior, particularly complex behavior, is primarily acquired through learning. There are two distinct processes for acquiring behavior: one is through direct experience to gain behavioral response patterns, and the other is through observing the behavior of a model to acquire behavior. Bandura refers to the latter as "learning through modeling," which is what we call learning from indirect experience. At the same time, Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the interaction of behavior, cognition, and environment in the social learning process [3]. Sports idols serve as "models" for adolescents' social learning behavior, and adolescents' idol worship is also a result of the interaction of behavior, cognition, and environment. Sports idols possess outstanding athletic achievements, tenacious spirit, a sunny and healthy appearance, and unique personal charm, making them elites in society and often favored by the public. During the process of idol worship, adolescents imitate the appearance and behavior of their idols as a model, thereby motivating themselves.

### *3.1.3. Adolescent sports idol worship and conformity psychology*

Social conformity psychology theory posits that in order to seek identification from peers and avoid isolation, adolescents, driven by a desire not to lag behind and a conformist mentality, wish to have common interests and hobbies with their friends, thus using sports idol worship as a means of communication.

## **3.2. Characteristics of adolescent sports idol worship**

### *3.2.1. The correlation between sports idol worship and the cultural background of the times*

Sports idol worship behavior is a specific behavior during the special period of adolescence and is closely related to the cultural background of the times. The sports idol worship behavior of adolescents reflects the popular youth trends of the current society, such as from the Beatles rock band of the last century to the current Korean hip-hop trend. In different eras, adolescents like different idols, and these idol worship behaviors with cultural marks will accompany the growth process of adolescents, becoming a mark in their growth process.

### *3.2.2. Emotional fixity and inner world of adolescent sports idol worship*

Sports idol worship has a relative fixity, and each individual generally has their own sports idols to worship. This kind of sports idol worship has a strong emotional color and emotional bias, becoming a major part of the inner world of adolescents. They are often attracted by the behavior and demeanor of their favorite sports idols and resonate emotionally with them.

### *3.2.3. Superficial psychology and behavioral imitation*

Adolescent sports idol worship has a certain value, but it is often limited to a superficial level of worship psychology. Adolescents are usually attracted by the excellent qualities of idols and want to imitate some of their behaviors, but in most cases, the way adolescents worship idols is only reflected in appreciation and imitation, and very rarely can it be transformed into real behavioral reproduction.

### *3.2.4. Sports idol worship and the disconnection from reality among adolescents*

Sports idol worship can produce a transcendence of reality and self-emotional experience. If this feeling is not restrained, it will often cause adolescents to reject the content of real life, be infatuated with or yearn for characters and lifestyles far from reality, and at the same time, it often weakens the self-restraint mechanism of adolescents, leading to behaviors that exceed social behavioral norms [4].

## **4. Media and media image**

### **4.1. The connotation of media**

Media has both broad and narrow meanings. According to Marshall McLuhan's perspective, the broad connotation of media is that "the medium is the message." Media refers not only to language, text, print, telecommunications, and radio and television, but also includes various transportation tools, and even clothing, housing, currency, etc. Anything that can extend human functions is within the category of media [5]; In the context of "media image," "media" refers to the narrow concept, which means professional communication organizations that use various means of communication to convey information to specific

groups in modern society, i.e., mass communication media, also known as mass media, media, or press, including television stations, radio stations, news agencies, websites, newspapers, etc.

#### **4.2. The nature of media**

In this paper, the nature of media is equivalent to the nature of mass communication media. Mass communication media has dual attributes: on the one hand, they are commercial institutions that sell news and entertainment content; on the other hand, they guide public opinion and convey social values through news supervision. According to the market model and public sphere model of the media proposed by David Crotus and William Hoyness, it can be seen that the media pursue commercial interests and market efficiency under the market model; while under the public sphere model, media content is not only considered a commodity, and the media is not just a tool for creating profits, but also the main source of information and storyteller, guiding the direction of public opinion and maintaining the system that ensures citizens' rights and space to participate in public affairs[6]. The profit-seeking attribute of the media makes it possible for the media to "uglify" sports idols in reports to increase explosive points and attract the audience, while the public interest attribute of the media requires the media to spread more positive images of sports idols that conform to the mainstream social values when shaping sports idols.

#### **4.3. The connotation of media image**

Media image has two meanings in reality: one refers to the image of the media, which is the image of the mass communication media organization itself. Since mass communication media organizations are also known as institutional communicators or communicators, it is also called "communicator media image"; the other meaning refers to the "image of people or things in the media," that is, the image of people or things represented in mass communication media. Because these people and objects play the role of being communicated, they are called "the communicated media image"[7]. The media image referred to in this paper is the "mediated image of the communicated," that is, the image of sports idols represented in the media.

### **5. Media and sports idols**

#### **5.1. Media image of sports idols**

The media image of sports idols refers to the image presented to the public through the media, including the idols themselves, their daily behaviors, performances in sports competitions, and the achievements they have made. It is the relatively stable position and overall impression they leave in the minds of the social public. It is the total views and evaluations, set of requirements and standards that the social public has towards sports stars, which can be simply understood as the public image derived from the media dissemination of sports idols. Through the channel of mass communication media, the media reports and promotes various sports competitions as well as the lives and training states of athletes, thereby forming an overall understanding of successful athletes in the minds of the public and gradually establishing the media image of sports idols [8].

#### **5.2. The relationship between media and the shaping of sports idols**

##### *5.2.1. Media environment and the shaping of sports idols*

The media environment provides the material conditions for the shaping of sports idols. After entering the new century, media technology has made significant progress. Multimedia technology application platforms and mobile clients such as the internet, digital television, digital radio, and digital magazines have gradually become an indispensable part of people's lives. According to the China Leisure Well-being Index report by the "Xiao kang" magazine from 2012 to 2013, the proportions of Chinese people who enjoy leisure activities such as surfing the internet, watching movies, watching TV, playing with mobile phones, and reading newspapers and magazines are very high (see Figure 1).

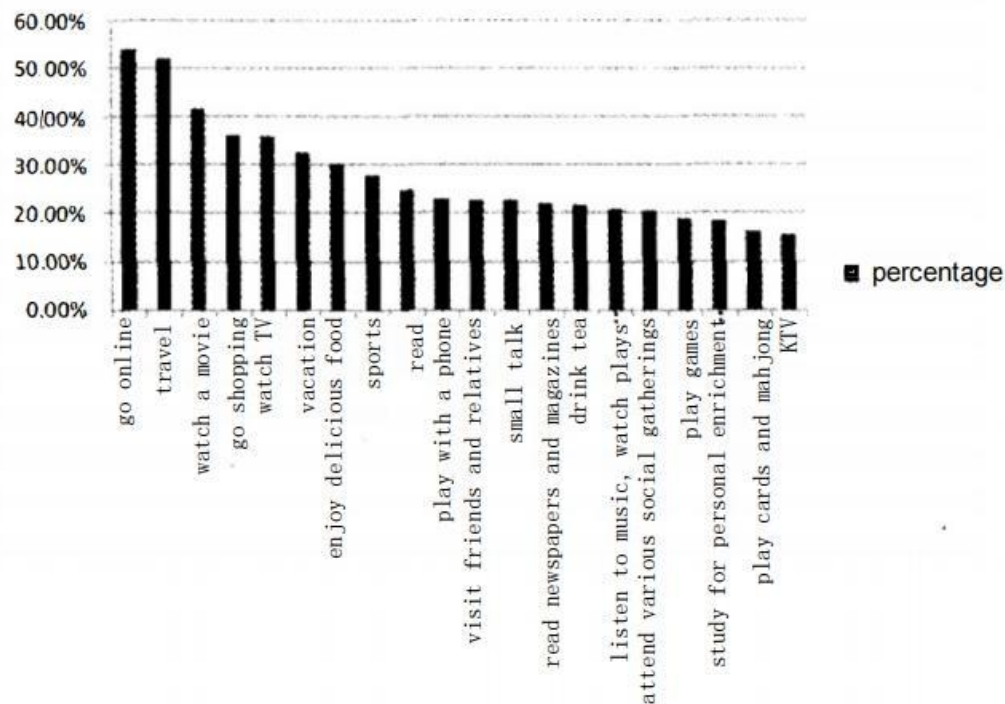


Figure 1: Favorite Leisure Activities of Chinese Residents

New media, with its unique communication characteristics, has changed the way information is published and received, influencing people's media usage concepts and becoming an indispensable part of life. Mobile phones and computers seem to have become the most important elements in people's lives. The deep dependence on mass media makes modern people unable to think without computers, mobile phones, and other media. Humans gradually rely on information disseminated by mass media to understand the world, think, and even judge right and wrong from the perspective of mass media. In terms of entertainment, people mainly use entertainment content produced by mass media to regulate themselves and enjoy happiness. Such a media environment has allowed mass media to divide part of the official discourse power, becoming fertile soil for mass media to shape sports idols.

#### 5.2.2. Media environment construction and shaping of sports idols

The environmental construction function of media is a necessary condition for the shaping of sports idols. In the 1920s, American scholar Walter Lippmann introduced the concept of "pseudo-environment" in his book "Public Opinion". "Pseudo-environment" refers to the information environment formed by mass communication activities, which is not a mirror-like reproduction of the objective environment, but rather an environment that is restructured by mass communication media through the selection, processing, and reporting of news and information, and then presented to people [9]. According to the "agenda-setting theory" in communication studies, mass media, as an institution of "environmental reconstruction," will select and process materials from the real environment that they consider important or beneficial to them, based on their values and reporting guidelines, or driven by economic interests. They give a certain structural order and then provide it to the audience in the form of "reporting facts". Under specific media environments, mass media can shape sports idols according to their own needs [9].

#### 5.2.3. The interactive relationship between sports idol shaping and media reporting

The shaping of sports idols is an important part of media reporting. As a fresh and exciting content with strong timeliness and watchability, sports is a key focus of various media outlets. Sports idols hold a significant position in both the primary and secondary fields of sports events and are the darlings of media reporting. The audience is not only fond of the outstanding performance of sports idols on the field but also

pays close attention to their various images and behaviors in real life. This is also a demand for curiosity and the desire for voyeurism. To attract the audience and achieve commercial benefits, major media outlets frequently report on sports idols in all aspects. For example, people are interested in Li Na's performance on the court and also pay attention to her interactions with her husband and family off the court.

## **6. The impact of media-shaped sports idols on adolescents and responses**

### **6.1. The impact of contemporary media-shaped sports idols on adolescents**

Modern mass media holds the discourse power over the dominant culture and value orientation, and with its strong constructive power, it influences people's understanding and judgment of their surroundings. The shaping of sports idols, as an important part of media reporting, whether it is objective positive coverage or negative coverage aimed at pursuing economic interests and attracting attention, has a significant impact on the growth of adolescents and their perception of the social environment.

The positive shaping of sports idols has a positive impact on adolescents.

Firstly, it inspires adolescents' passion for sports and guides them to participate in sports activities. Sports idols are generally at the forefront of their respective sports, and adolescents, by following their idols and watching their competitions, develop an interest in sports and learn from and imitate their idols, thus engaging in sports activities. For example, with Li Na's rise in the international tennis rankings and the media's praise for her, an increasing number of Chinese adolescents have started playing tennis.

Secondly, the worship of sports idols can enrich the emotions of adolescents and improve their spiritual life. According to Bandura's social learning theory, individual growth is influenced by environmental factors, especially during adolescence when adolescents are more susceptible to external influences. For adolescents, the devout worship of sports idols greatly enriches their emotional life, and the unyielding and tenacious sports spirit of these idols inspires their enthusiasm for learning and living. At the same time, the good moral qualities of sports idols, such as unity, respect for competition, adherence to order, and respect for opponents, will also accelerate the socialization process of adolescents. For instance, media coverage of the NBA allows adolescents to worship sports idols with exceptional skills while also being influenced by their unity and collective spirit in striving for victory.

Thirdly, it stimulates students' patriotism and collectivism. On the field, sports idols strive for the honor of their country, sweating on the field and shedding tears on the podium with the rising national flag and the playing national anthem, leaving a deep impression on the minds of adolescents and helping to cultivate their patriotism and collectivism.

### **6.2. The negative impact of mass media shaping sports idols on adolescents**

When mass media turns the shaping of sports idols into a means of pursuing economic benefits, and "uglifies" sports idols to gain more attention, it can have many negative impacts on adolescents.

Firstly, the mass media shapes sports idols to advocate consumerism and lead fashion, often alienating and materializing sports idols as tools. For example, when Li Na won her first Grand Slam in tennis, many sponsors sought her endorsement, and during this period, Li Na appeared in various advertisements, with her image associated with different ads and consumed by numerous sponsors and audiences. Adolescents, influenced by this, focus more on the value and wealth of sports idols rather than their athletic abilities, which can lead them to excessively pursue superficial vanities like money. It is not conducive to their healthy physical and mental development.

Secondly, the profit-driven nature of mass media leads them to prefer shaping sports idols with commercial value and often dissolves reflection and criticism of reality in the process of shaping sports idols. The media, in addition to focusing on sports idols' competitions, is more keen on reporting on their sensational news, such as romantic relationships and private lives. When idols are demystified and slide from secular to vulgar, it brings a trend of nihilism and narcissism, making moral ideals and spiritual beliefs seem dispensable [10]. Such sports idols shaped by the media will undoubtedly cause confusion in adolescents' moral thinking and lead to the formation of a series of unhealthy psychological and behavioral habits in adolescents who are in the stage of forming their values.

Thirdly, there is a severe lack of moral ideals and moral personality in the way mass media shapes sports idols. By distorting and making fun of the unique characteristics of sports idols, using lowbrow humor to entertain the audience, and using the ugliness to amuse, this situation can affect the establishment of adolescents' correct aesthetic views and thus affect the development of their sound personalities.

In summary, the impact of media shaping of sports idols on adolescents has its advantages and disadvantages. However, the overly profit-driven nature of contemporary media has led to moral deficiencies in the shaping of sports idols, causing many adverse effects on adolescents.

### **6.3. Suggestions to address the negative impact of contemporary media shaping of idols on adolescents**

#### *6.3.1. The role of government in shaping the media image of sports idols*

The government should strengthen guidance. Shaping a positive media image of sports idols is not only related to athletes and mass media but also closely related to the state and relevant departments. Under the national system, the Chinese government plays a significant role in managing athletes and establishing their images. Currently, the government's sports work mainly focuses on winning gold medals in international competitions. Around this goal, the main task of the government and related institutions is to improve athletes' technical and tactical levels, but there is a significant lack of attention to the cultivation of athletes' cultural quality and the guidance of their social responsibility. This has led to situations where many athletes, even if they become world champions, may face criticism from the media and society due to their weak cultural quality and sense of social responsibility. For example, our country's famous swimmer Sun Yang has been involved in scandals such as drunk driving and conflicts with coaches. To avoid similar situations, the government and relevant departments should not only improve athletes' technical and tactical levels but also strengthen their cultural education and the cultivation of their sense of social responsibility, making them not only excellent athletes but also outstanding social talents.

#### *6.3.2. Media responsibility: Balancing commercial interests and public morality*

Media should balance commercial interests with public responsibility. In a market environment, it is inevitable that media will pursue profits, but they should also pay attention to their professional ethics and moral standards. As an important field for disseminating public discourse, conveying mainstream social values, and guiding public opinion, media should be aware of their social responsibilities and provide audiences with more diverse and healthier media content. In shaping sports idols, the media should emphasize their positive role models, avoiding the commodification and alienation, and over-consumption of idols.

#### *6.3.3. Sports idol image construction and public relations management*

Sports idols and their teams should pay attention to their image construction. The behavior of sports idols directly affects their media image. Firstly, the image of sports idols is mainly reflected in the competition process. Their excellent athletic performance and the spirit of tenacious struggle, unyielding, and never giving up are the foundations for establishing a good image. For example, Lionel Messi's superb level and composure when dribbling past opponents often convince the media and fans. Secondly, the excellent character and good upbringing displayed by sports idols outside the competition field are important bases for the mass media to shape their image. In addition, it is best for sports idols to establish their own public relations team to maintain communication and information sharing with the media, respond to crisis public relations, and manage their media image. For example, Yao Ming has outstanding athletic performance and an indomitable spirit on the NBA court, and he is also a humble, friendly, and public-spirited healthy image in life. He and his team have been very successful in shaping his media image.

#### *6.3.4. Schools and families: Guiding adolescents to rationally worship sports idols*

Schools and parents should pay attention to educational methods and correctly guide students' worship of sports idols. Schools and parents should correctly understand and grasp the psychological characteristics of adolescents' worship of sports idols, fully exercise educational functions, and communicate effectively with adolescents to understand the idols they worship. For idols with positive social energy, excellent qualities, and personal charm, schools and parents can appropriately encourage them and guide them to learn from

their idols to stimulate their enthusiasm for life and learning. For sports idols with serious behavioral defects, schools and parents should patiently communicate with adolescents, let them understand that idols also have shortcomings, guide them to correctly recognize idols and avoid these shortcomings, and learn from the advantages of idols. At the same time, teach adolescents to correctly recognize the current media environment, guide them to think rationally, develop the habit of independent thinking, and avoid being assimilated by the overly virtual mass media.

## 7. Conclusion

Adolescent worship of sports idols is a relatively common and normal phenomenon during individual adolescence, reflecting the need for self-identity establishment, learning, and imitation. The rapid development of mass media has provided the material and necessary conditions for the media shaping of sports idols, while the media portrayal of sports idols, as an important part of media reporting, influences the healthy growth of adolescents. A positive media image of sports idols has a beneficial effect on the healthy development of adolescents. However, the profit-driven nature of contemporary media often leads to a lack of morality and ethics in the shaping of sports idols, resulting in the commodification and alienation of sports idols, turning them into consumer products. The phenomena of mocking and sensationalizing sports idols affect adolescents' establishment of values and their ability to think independently and rationally, having adverse effects on their growth. In response, various sectors of society should adopt different strategies: the government should strengthen guidance, focusing on improving athletes' performance while also emphasizing the cultivation of their overall qualities; sports idols themselves should pay attention to team building and manage their media image; mass media should balance the pursuit of commercial interests with the embodiment of social responsibility; and teachers and parents, who have the most contact with adolescents, should properly guide their worship of sports idols during school and family education.

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