

Exploration and Analysis of Athletes' Starization under the Background of Consumer Culture

Weidong Zuo

Institute of P.E. of the Huanggang Normal University, Huangzhou, Hubei Province 438000

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Abstract: Propelled by mass media, sport becomes wonder and scenic event against the background of consumer culture, and “human being”, the subject of sports also become the core of consumption. This thesis will indicate that, only athletes carefully chosen by media and business could become stars as the objectives of consumers to attain self-recognition and social-identification. Sport stars are capable of conveying positive meaning of sport culture; however, the society regards sports stars as pure consumable. To put sport consumption and star-building in perspective is conducive to the sound development of sport industry and sport culture.

1. Introduction

February 22nd, 2017, there exposed an official letter by Swimming Sports Management Center of the State General Administration of Sports to ask Ning Zetao to return back to the Chinese Navy Team for training. Like a tiny stone stirring up huge waves, this sparked debate among numerous media and the public who tried to seek confirmation of the letter which points out that the reason why Ning Zetao was pulled out of the national team was because he endorsed advertisements without explicit approval, disobeyed the nation's arrangement for contests and refused to compete in the qualifying round of relay race. It also became a focus whether he could stay in the national team for training and run prizes. Superficially, the ferment of this incident shows how individual athlete and their group deal with and coordinate their conflicts; however, in essence, this reflects the choices and leaving of professional athletes after they become sport stars [1]. And the long-heated phenomenon of athletes becoming stars appears again in the public eye. Whether professional athletes should be deemed as stars especially in the modern society featured consumer culture, emerges as an important issue calling for deep thinking and exploration.

2. Consumer Culture and the Evolution of Sports Culture Against this Backdrop

A scholar has indicated that: Consumerism culture, as a cultural thought and a way of life appeared in western countries in 20c, is also a value system coercively embraces the general public in modern society in an invisible way with propelling commodities as impetus. In the post-industrial era, consumerism does not just prevail in the consumption of materials and goods; ad hoc, it refers to the value system and lifestyle it carries off, and its culture and signs become the core of consumption: besides commodities, people also buy the meaning and connotations they symbolize. In China, people's living standards has been increased and their consumption consciousness has changed as a result of the rapid development of society and economy. From craze for culture to the parade of and pursuit for culture, traditional consumption has gradually transformed into consuming desire and symbols while people searching for sense of self-identification by virtue of consumption.

As an important cultural field in modern society, athletic sport is endowed with strong spectating, entertaining and cultural elements based on the valiant and struggling sport spirits, the fierce and splendid competitions and youthful and vigorous athletes. Together with the popularity and secularity of sport activities and its close ties to political culture, sport has been what the media and businesses are “consuming”. In modern society, sport no longer represents the pure pursuit of free competition driven by the Olympic spirits; however, it has become events viewed as wonders and landscapes. Consumer culture has produced numberless myths about sports, such as “legend of Yao

Ming” and “flying man Liu Xiang”, which leads the public to consume the culture they derive; thus, the subjective of sports— “human being” become the core of consumption, and this is closely related to the construction and development of athletes’ starization.

3. The Construction of Sport Stars

Affected by consumer culture, professional athletes could eventually become stars after the constructive process of “starization”. Glorified and commercialized by the media and the businesses through special package and manipulation, athletes could be the spokesman of a certain social culture when they are being consumed and internalized. However, not all athletes could be treated as stars; only those who are carefully chosen by the media and business and who are capable of leading the public to spend on related cultures can be the target of consumers’ self-identification and social acknowledgement [2].

3.1 One of the elements to become stars for athletes is to boast outstanding scores

It is an indispensable requirement for athletes to achieve excellent results in Olympic games, world champions or professional league matches if they want to stand out. For example, Yao Ming achieved success in NBA games and finally won the glory of being a member of the Hall of Fame; Li Na won two grand slams in the French and Australian Open Tennis Championship; Liu Xiang created miracles in the track and field events, all of which made them the focuses of the whole world. World-class grades would easily stimulate the public’s sense of identity and group honor towards their nation’s athletes who will then be deified and be the symbol of social culture. The importance of sports achievements also lies in that once athletes slip in their grades and are no longer noticed by the media, they would soon walk down the altar. Possessing no more consuming significance, they would be forgotten by the public.

3.2 To become stars athletes have to be provided with performing stages

Compared with diving, ping-pong, gymnastics and other items, Chinese weightlifting team owns remarkable amounts of gold medals. However, weightlifting athletes are rarely ballyhooed as stars, and this has something to do with “attention economy”. Basically, athletes who are starized are popular in fields that are wondered such as the worldwide football, basketball, diving and ping-pong, etc. The contents of these sports are widely focused for their amusement pursued crazily by people especially in the consumer culture. Athletes in these fields are regarded as proper topics and commercial values they carry are propagandized by the media and are important components of consumer culture.

3.3 Whether athletes can become stars is related to their personal temperament

Edward Morzine once said:” Stars refer to those who are endowed with the same features as gods in Olympus and heroes in Greek mythologies and who can participate in both human and divine activities as well as those who arouse people’s mentality of worship or even a kind of belief.” Athletes who are able to be starized are linked to gods in Olympus and heroes in Greek mythologies by the spectators thanks to such qualities as attractive and handsome appearance, healthy and beautiful bodies, good living habits and address, unswerving will, fascinating style and glamour and slight drawbacks in addition to outstanding achievements and accessible performing stages, then they will win divine admiration of the spectators [3]. For instance, Li Na’s bold remarks in competitions make the spectators accept her personality; Yao Ming’s deaf left ear has brought him much care and encouragements; Sun Yang’s awkwardness in land serves as a foil to his loveliness; and Zhang Jike’s intractability earns him more women fans; all these traits are similar to Achilles’ Heel, enabling stars to connect the mortal and the gods.

3.4 The occurrence of sport stars is inseparable with the boost of mass media

The system of sport stars forms accompanied by consumer culture, during the process of which mass media plays a driving role. Experts of communication study Daniel Dayan and Elihu Kats

showed that: “The power of medium can not only disseminate information into the society, but also produce online spilt, integration and design social structure on its own.” The media needs to be filled with events which calls for the attention of the media. Meanwhile, since the mass media owns the function of “conferring status”, when they bestow athletes with honor and dignity, athletes are gradually noticed by the public as regarded as stars; therefore, the result brought by mass media’s interference in sport culture is also what it leads to by fabricating gods for the public.

However, mass media is like a double-edged sword, able to make athletes popular stars, and drag them down the altar. Liu Xiang’s withdraw from competition and Lin Dan’s affair let the public to consume stars from another perspective by transforming them into easily-controllable commodities.

4. Advantages and Disadvantages of Sport Stars’ Effect

Once athletes are starized and become sport stars, they can guide the public’s consumption while being consumed, Sport stars can not only present competitive sports for admiration, but also create external meaning concerned with their individual images. From Yao Ming people see power and persistence, from Li Ning skills and agility, from Guo Jingjing and Wu Minxia traditional veiled beauty of oriental women and from Zhang Jike the manifestation of personality. The public imperceptibly accept the cultural meaning conveyed by sport stars when they are consuming the latter, which can be seen as following.

4.1 Sport stars bring about sense of national pride and identification

World-class sport events are extremely fierce and contestants are from different countries, in this way they contain connotation of belonging culturally. For example, Li Na, Yao Ming and Ding Junhui’s success in world professional tournaments give the spectators “special identification” via the reports and publicity of media, greatly strengthening national self-esteem and solidarity.

4.2 Sport stars’ effect is conducive to steering the social value

A scholar thinks that:” The public relations value of sport stars refers to their positive influence upon the activities about public relations of the social organizations as the subject of it, i.e., a socialized individual.” Positive and healthy, sport activities are favored by numerous people especially teenagers. And since they are in a critical period of their live, they cry out for establishing a relationship of “identity” with idols that they adore; therefore, traits of sport stars are what they first choose to imitate and learn from.

4.3 The starization of stars opens developing space for retired athletes

Resorting to their sway, sport stars could give play to their values by engaging in entertainment, public welfare, study, teaching and so on. Typical examples are as follows: Den Yaping assumes a high post in a national department; Yao Ming takes up the chairman of Chinese Basketball Association; Li Ning set up his own brand; Tian Liang, Li Xiaopeng and Liu Xuan enter the entertainment circle. As a star, athletes can gain social resources, free from sense of loss after farewell to training and the stage of games, which may restrict the full paly of their value and cause poorness in life as well as setbacks in their psychology. However, “starization” of athletes is impacted by the consumerism culture in the whole society. The media and business are often treat sport stars as pure commodities to “consume” them excessively, which is reflected in.

4.4 Reports on sport stars concentrate on their personality, private lives and gossips.

These reports deviate from concentration on sport games, grades and training, which essentially strays away from the original intention of sport culture. For example, after the Rio Olympic Games, huge amount of “emoji packages” of Fu Yuanhui are downloaded and forwarded as a result of her exaggerated body languages and blunt remarks and she also became one of the most well-known sport stars in 2016. However, Fu Yuanhui once said in an interview: “Why people only talk about emoji package when they think of me? All I get is emoji package after over-ten-year swimming training?” From this we can know that, essentially, athletes don’t want to be hyped; instead, they

hope their achievements and ranking could be recognized.

4.5 Overdue consumption presents a weird paradox for sport stars' prospects

Engagement in various advertisements endorsement and variety shows of sport stars is based on their marvelous attainments after they become famous. However, commercial activities greatly obstruct them to exercise validly and unfavorable scores will disappoint their fans who may betray them. Accordingly, their commercial effect will diminish and finally, they will fail in both endorsement and sport which can be balanced only by Yao Ming, Li Na and Sun Yang, etc. On the contrary, much more stars such as Liu Xiang, Ning Zetao and Tian Liang have suffered setbacks because they fail to handle the duality of their status.

4.6 Overdue consumption of sport stars is detrimental to the continuation and protection of sport spirits

Sport is positive and wholesome, moreover, sport can embody the spirit of fair competition and struggling bravely. Nevertheless, once a sport star cannot keep his or her myth and legend and is trapped by scandal, his or her authority and personal glamour will collapse [4]. Overseas there is Tiger Woods, a golf player who was involved in sexual scandal; in China, there are Liu Xiang who withdrew from games and Lin Dan who have an affair. Sport spectators would first doubt these athletes' qualities and then sports, sport circle and sport spirits. And the more stars are "consumed" or the bigger their effect are, the greater the negative influence upon sport spirits they will have.

5. Countermeasures and Enlightenment of Athletes' "Starization"

In consumer economy, the body of athletes attracts people's attention as the main part. After the era when body and desire were taboo for talking, the rise of sport broke the constraint of traditional Chinese culture on "body", satisfying people's thirst for consumption. Therefore, promoted by the media, the trend of athletes' "starization" will definitely be intensified. Just as some scholars mention that, "Consumer culture not only changes the concept of life and way of consumption, but also bring revolutionary transform to the cognition and understanding towards time, space, society, individual, nation, country and other critical fields." If sport could hardly escape from "being consumed", then how to properly regard consumption of sport culture, the shaping of sport stars and the benign development of sport industry remains a problem we have to face up to.

5.1 The country should set forth relative regulative policies

To deal with the contradiction between training and competition and commercial activities of athletes, the country should formulate policies beneficial to their development to avoid cases where athletes' careers are broken off due to one-size-fits-all solutions and where athletes' grades slip due to frequent participation in commercial activities. Besides, it is important to plan the career for retired athletes who can take advantage of their star effect to take up educational and public service, entering the school, community and club to publicize and teach sport culture.

5.2 The mass media should establish positive guidance

Since the mass media plays a vital role in building sport stars, the restraint on the medium and its cognition of its own responsibility is critical to the dissemination of sport culture. Since the rise of Yao Ming, his endorsing advertisements and social influence symbolize the arrival of era for sport stars. When the business and the media collude with each other and include sport stars as a link in the chain of consumer culture, the nature of athletes are dissimilated. However, true sport spirit should be "a cultural activity aiming to build up healthy body and mind with physical exercise as the basic means. The media should pay close attention to sport itself and enable it to regain the nature of sport spirit.

5.3 Sport stars should aptly handle its status as an entertainment star

Derived of this status, sport star is a professional athlete in nature with scores and

spirit of fighting relentlessly in competition as the core of his or her identity. As mentioned above, once athletes' grades slip, they would slump in their career and their status as a star will also weaken. Yao Ming, Li Na, Sun Yang and Zhang Jike could be the long-term spokesman for over ten advertisements and join various variety shows during the gap between training because they are able to raise their profile by achieving incessant excellent grades, which makes a conspicuous show of their star effect.

6. Conclusion

Whether an athlete has star effect or whether he or she is on the altar or not, when he or she is packaged by the media he become a controllable commodity. What we can do is to face this phenomenon directly and enlighten the later comers with sound policies. From the country to the media, from athletes to individual, all of us should disseminate and publicize true sport spirits to lead positive and wholesome social culture, letting sport culture to enjoy positive and profound value and meaning.

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