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Sportswomen under the Chinese male gaze: A feminist critical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a timely, critical analysis of the male gaze upon sportswomen in male Chinese fans' consumption of sporting megaevents. We use the most popular Chinese-language sports fandom platform, Hupu, as the data repository and scrutinise the threads of male Hupu users' postings about two elite sportswomen at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics as the case studies. Drawing on feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), we elucidate the discursive strategies that male Chinese fans adopt to sexualise sportswomen and trivialise their accomplishments. The research findings showcase how China's sports fandom has evolved as a masculine terrain, where men's visions of asymmetrical gender power relations are discursively negotiated and rationalised.

KEYWORDS

China; FCDA; feminist critical discourse analysis; Hupu; Olympics; sportswoman; sports fandom

Introduction

With 49% of participating athletes being women, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) declared the 2020 Tokyo edition to be the first-ever 'gender-balanced Games in history' (Honderich, 2021, n.p.). The achievement is symbolic of the increase in the level of participation in women's sports, but it does not conceal the fact of sport being still consumed through 'the prism of male hegemony' (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 299). Women's sports generally suffer from a lack of media exposure, which does not reflect the growth of sportswomen's engagement (Cooky et al., 2013). Behind the scenes, it is the widely accepted commercial logic, which deems women's sports as 'not interesting,' resulting in resources being disproportionately allocated to their male counterparts (Sherry et al., 2016).

In China, sporting megaevents form an important arena for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) nationalist politics (Sullivan et al., 2019). Based on a state-sponsored athlete system, the Chinese team has accumulated hundreds of gold medals since its return to the IOC in 1984, with more than half of them coming from sportswomen (Schuinski et al., 2021).¹ With the national anthem being played at medal ceremonies,

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these sportswomen's successes brought the representations of athletic womanhood to the forefront of male Chinese fans' sports consumption. Yet, existing critical accounts of China's sports fandom remain largely focused on men's games (Cha & Lim, 2019; Shen et al., 2021). Although there have been a few studies on the media portrayals of sportswomen (Xu et al., 2018; Xu & Kreshel, 2020), limited attention has been paid to male Chinese fans' engagement with women's sports.

This article examines how women's sports are consumed by male Chinese sports fans, based on case studies of their postings retrieved from the Chinese-language sports fandom platform, Hupu. Adopting feminist critical discourse analysis, we scrutinise the discursive strategies used by male Chinese fans to sexualise sportswomen. Beneath the surface of sexualisation is the persistence of gendered values, which trivialise sportswomen's athletic accomplishments. Such a trivialisation becomes apparent when sportswomen's achievements are assessed against that of their male counterparts, allowing male fans to substantiate the perceived superiority of men. This underscores how patriarchy and misogyny are reflected in Chinese-language social-mediated sports communication.

Background

Gendering women's sports

Sport is historically perceived as a masculine field. Notwithstanding the significant increase in women's participation, the media exposure of sportswomen continues to be disproportional today (Cooky et al., 2013). The Olympics, as a sporting megaevent organised by the IOC, which officially recognises equality, diversity, and inclusion (Xu & Billings, 2021), offer sportswomen a stage to pursue their gender politics, although such efforts are hampered by the institutionalisation of patriarchy in the media (Billings & Butterworth, 2021). This phenomenon is tellingly evidenced by how the Euro-American popular press sexualises sportswomen (e.g. focusing on their appearance) and trivialises their accomplishments (e.g. underestimating the importance of their achievements) (Sherry et al., 2016).

In contrast to the gendering of sport in Euro-American societies (Cooky et al., 2013), sportswomen are traditionally represented as 'legitimate and serious athletes,' and their personal lives seldom appear in China's sports news (Xu et al., 2018, p. 157). Such a seemingly gender-neutral sports culture is evidenced by how its media hailed the Chinese women's football team's silver medal-winning streak at the 1996 Olympic Games and the 1999 World Cup. During this period 'iron roses' (铿锵玫瑰) was made a catchy slogan praising the entire generation of female Chinese footballers for their excellent skills and spirit of perseverance (Hong & Mangan, 2003, p. 47). Currently, the marketisation of the Chinese media industry has shaken this commendable tradition, with digital news outlets starting to use a sensational style of reporting to cover not only elite sportswomen's athletic accomplishments but also their personal lives and romantic relationships (Xu & Kreshel, 2020). However, the flagship state-owned media still maintain aspects of the traditional gender-neutral sports reporting tradition, despite evidence of an increase in their gendered Olympic coverage of sportswomen in recent years (Xu et al., 2018).

Sports fandom culture

Diverging from communication studies focusing on how the media facilitates the gendering of women's sports (Billings et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018; Xu & Kreshel, 2020), contemporary fandom scholarship defines sport as an abstract venue for sports fans to construct and reflect their identities (Gray et al., 2017; King, 2016; Sandvoss & Ball, 2018). This research trajectory specifically accounts for fans' agency, which allows them to decode media content in their ways (Sandvoss & Ball, 2018). Such an intellectual quest draws on Giddens' (1991) analysis of late-modernity, which highlights active audiences' self-reflective popular cultural consumption. It offers the grounding for in-depth analyses of how sport emerges as an open text consumed by fans to reflect on their positions in society (Gray et al., 2017).

Contemporary fandom scholarship has noted Chinese fans' self-reflective sports consumption (Peng et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2021). With a focus on gender dynamics, Gong (2017) examines how female Chinese fans appropriate elite European sportsmen as slash objects by 'shipping'² them together in imagined same-sex romantic relationships. Her findings reveal the extent to which such a homoerotic imagination of sportsmen's bodies destabilises the traditional model of masculinity. Yet, such a destabilisation does not alter the gender hierarchy in sports fandom culture across the globe, where female fans' experience is marginalised because of male fans' control over the interpretation of authenticity (Sandvoss & Ball, 2018).

Post-socialist gender politics

Post-socialist gender politics captures the political engineering and socio-cultural shaping of gender power relations in China after the CCP launched marketisation-oriented reforms of the economy (Wallis, 2018). Under Mao's leadership (1949–1976), gender equality was promoted through political campaigns, which granted Chinese women access to work, education, and free marriage (Luo & Sun, 2015). Yet, while it is acknowledged for its improvement of women's social status, Mao's ideology is simultaneously criticised for neutralising the qualities of women and men against their will (Rofel, 2007). Thus, emerging as a backlash against Maoism, post-socialist gender politics features celebrating 'human nature,' which claims to appreciate the aspirations and desires of individual women and men (Qiao & Wang, 2019; Zhao & Bouvier, 2022). It feeds into the changing ethos of the post-reform era, which highlights individualism and self-entrepreneurship to conceal structural social issues (Wallis, 2018; Yin & Sun, 2021).

An important axis of post-socialist gender politics is built upon a masculinity-crisis discourse. In China, traditional male ideals reflected a *wen-wu* (文武) dyad, which simultaneously underscored their cultural attainment and martial valour (Louie, 2002). Compared with the Euro-American hegemonic type, this indigenous model of masculinity was arguably softened due to the inclusion of *wen*, but this did not mitigate the autocracy of Chinese men in gendered power relations based on the emphasis on *wu* (Song & Hird, 2014). Thus, the masculinity-crisis discourse first appeared in early-reform intellectual debates, which called the neutralisation of Chinese men during Mao's era into question because they deviated from the *wen-wu* dyad (Yang, 2010). This discourse was 'substantiated' by the CCP's downsizing of state-owned enterprises, which led to male workers

losing tenured employment that overturned the power relations in their homes (Song & Hird, 2014). In this sense, the masculinity-crisis discourse is compatible with the CCP's post-reform propaganda, which conveniently shifts the responsibility for issues of social stratification away from the state government to individuals (Talmacs, 2017).

Contextualised against the masculinity-crisis discourse, post-socialist gender politics are engineered by men's renewed quest for male hegemony. Interestingly, these quests often take the form of self-victimisation, with women's increased sexual freedom being a key area of critique (Liu et al., 2021). As Song and Hird (2014) note, albeit with the post-reform diversification of masculinities, men's sexual attractions are very much associated with their socio-economic positions. Such an association is evidenced by contemporary wedding traditions, which require the groom to provide symbolic expenses, such as monetary betrothal presents and real estate properties (Luo & Sun, 2015). Yet, while questioning women's self-objectification, Chinese men rarely challenge the patriarchal logic of such traditions. Instead, men's version of the 'reality' often highlights women's 'natural' aspirations to be with powerful men to legitimise their control over socio-economic resources (Liu 2019). This masks the situation where the restructured labour market has disadvantaged female employees, and the revived patriarchal values have disproportionately allocated family services to women (Li, 2015).

Men's discursive practice in the social media sphere reflects their quest for male hegemony (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). This practice is of a self-reflective manner, which is energised by the rise and fall of their positions of power in society. Assuming a late-modern account, one's social actions are not only constitutive of how they understand themselves but also conditioned by how they contextualise such an understanding in their everyday lives (Giddens, 1991). As Bourdieu (2001, p. 66) notes, a male gaze, which reflects how women's bodies are reconstructed through the eyes of men as 'welcoming, attractive, and available symbolic objects,' constitutes a crucial dimension of the matrix, as it contributes to men's vision of gender power relations that facilitates male domination. As such, the male gaze at sportswomen offers a necessary scope to foreground how post-socialist gender politics plays out in China's sports fandom.

Theoretical framework

A dialectical-relational approach

A dialectical-relational approach (DRA) to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which has inspired feminist scrutiny of contemporary popular cultural texts from a sociolinguistic perspective (Lazar, 2007), offers a conceptual foundation to foreground male Chinese sports fans' consumption of women's sports. Resonating with Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach and van Dijk's (1997) socio-cognitive approach, Fairclough's (2013) conceptualisation of DRA reflects a transdisciplinary approach to CDA studies. This allows for the incorporation of theoretical lenses from outside of the sociolinguistic field to be used to address structural problems reflected in communications of any kind.

In Fairclough's (2016, p. 231) terms, discourse is defined as both 'the language associated with a particular social field or practice' and 'a way of constructing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective.' Discourses are engineered in communication through different modes of semiotic items to facilitate a sense-making

process (Richardson, 2017). This sense-making process does not occur in isolation but is constitutive of larger, societal processes, which are dialectically related to one another to uphold the (re)production of power relations (Fairclough, 2013). With such dialectical relations in mind, DRA oscillates between a focus upon economic/political structures and then upon social actions to detect the 'linguistic manifestations [of social conflict] in discourse, in specific elements of dominance, difference, and resistance' (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 27). The conceptualisation of DRA reflects Fairclough's (2013) progressive politics, purposively uncovering social injustice to inform social changes. It calls for sociolinguists to be mindful of the dynamic nexus of discourses and other social actors (Richardson, 2017), laying the foundation for a transdisciplinary quest to incorporate feminist perspectives in CDA studies.

Feminist critical discourse analysis

In part, influenced by Fairclough's (2013) DRA, Lazar's (2017) feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) showcases a transdisciplinary attempt to revisit gender-issue debates through CDA studies. Using FCDA as an umbrella term, Lazar (2007, p. 147) articulates her analysis of the 'dialectical tension between structural permanence and the practical activity of people engaged in social practices' that addresses how asymmetric gender power relations are reflected in popular cultural texts. Instead of proposing a specific analytical framework, it advocates a feminist paradigm of sociolinguistic inquiry to investigate the (re)production of gender hierarchy in the discursive realm (Lazar, 2017). In this sense, FCDA emerges as a feminist response to the broader CDA field, which explicitly acknowledges women's perspectives and their contributions to knowledge.

What FCDA and DRA-informed CDA share in common is 'a constitutive view of discourse' (Lazar, 2017, p. 374). Yet, the former emphasises a critical account of the 'interconnections between and the particularities of discursive strategies' that enable or hamper women's agency in societal processes, which are dialectically (re)shaped by gendered economic/political institutions and patriarchal social norms (Lazar, 2007, p. 144). Despite their focus on English-language sources, Yu and Tian's (2022) analysis of the media portrayals of Chinese single womanhood offers a glimpse of how gender stereotypes are challenged in media discourses. Although the study sheds light on the application of FCDA in the Chinese context, the research design is consistent with the overrepresentation of elite discourses in traditional CDA studies (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017).

Social media offers an essential venue for global symbolic exchanges (Chen & Peng, 2022; Peng et al., 2020). Sports fandom platforms are typically used by male fans to champion their agenda, providing the imbalanced female-male ratio of the user demographics (Zhou et al., 2020). For instance, Gong's (2016) research unpacks how male Chinese football fans juggle two masculine terms, *gaofushuai* (高富帅) and *diaosi* (屌丝), to define or question the meanings of Chinese masculinities. Her findings suggest that male fans' juggling of the two terms showcases how sports fandom platforms become 'a site for discursive struggles over the hegemonic masculinity' (Gong, 2016, p. 20). These findings echo accounts of elite discourses in existing FCDA literature (Lazar, 2007; Yu & Tian, 2022), confirming how toxic patriarchal values are perpetuated in China through social-mediated communication.

Research design

The current research was designed under the rubric of Lazar's (2007) FCDA, which advances Fairclough's (2013) DRA-based prescription through a feminist sociolinguistic lens. Fairclough (2016, p. 91) suggests that the design of a DRA-based study involves four interlocking stages, namely, 1) 'focus[ing] upon a social wrong,' 2) 'identify[ing] obstacles to addressing the social wrong,' 3) 'consider[ing] whether the social order 'needs' the social wrong,' and 4) 'identify[ing] possible ways past the obstacles.' In light of this methodological prescription, we followed Lazar's (2007) FCDA trajectory and considered male Chinese fans' gendering of women's sports as a social wrong underpinning aspect of patriarchal norms in the discursive realm, which urges sociolinguistic intervention. The following research questions were raised accordingly to scaffold the empirical inquiry.

1. How do male Chinese sports fans gaze at sportswomen's bodies?
2. How do male Chinese sports fans assess sportswomen's accomplishments?

Hupu was used as a data repository for the research. Hupu is currently the most-used Chinese-language sports fandom platform (Sohu, 2020). It was launched in 2004 for basketball fans to organise their communities (Zhou et al., 2020). With almost two decades of development, the social media platform now has an established reputation amongst Chinese sports fans across the board. Recent statistics show that Hupu has approximately 55 million active users, who generate 700,000 posts daily (Zhou et al., 2020), with over 90% of Hupu users being men (Sohu, 2020). Such user demographics allow us to foreground male Chinese fans' gaze upon sportswomen through Hupu users' postings when women's sports formed a focal point at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Based on their potential to capture specific aspects of the issue under investigation, we purposively selected Zhang Yufei (a Chinese sportswoman) and Marta Vieira da Silva (a foreign sportswoman) as the case studies.

The first case is based on Hupu users' postings in the threads of a question, titled *What would you do if you have a girlfriend like Olympic champion Zhang Yufei* (要是奥运冠军张雨霏这样的女朋友, jr们会怎样).³ Zhang is a female swimmer, who collected most medals for the Chinese team at Tokyo 2020. The question was asked on 29th July 2021, after Zhang obtained the championship for the women's 200-meter butterfly. With the establishment of a new world record, it was the most prominent moment in Zhang's career, placing her under the media spotlight. Zhang was repeatedly described by China's sports media as a 'beauty' (NetEase, 2021, n.p.). The question posted on Hupu was in line with the portrayal, which invited male Hupu users to imagine the Olympic medallist as their date. With 451 commentaries being generated in the threads, the question offered a collection of posts, which offered the opportunity to unpack the male gaze upon sportswomen's bodies.

The second case focuses on the threads of a video clip captioned 'Female Pelé' Marta and her unbelievable football skills ('女贝利' 玛塔, 离谱的球技)⁴ and gifs titled Brazilian's Marta is still playing. Let's see what her prime performance was like (原来巴西玛塔还在踢, 那我们看看巅峰什么样子吧),⁵ which captured the high-profile moments of the sportswoman, Marta, on the football pitch. Having been named FIFA World Player of

the Year six times, Marta is widely regarded as one of the greatest footballers, and this makes her a household name in China's sports fandom as well (Sohu, 2021). Posted in late July 2021 around the time when she scored twice against the Chinese women's team at the Olympics, the video clip and the gifs attracted a total of 281 posts. With the sexuality of Marta not being the focal point of the threads, the posts offered another ideal case to reveal male Chinese sports fans' assessments of sportswomen's accomplishments.

In the data analysis, we first verified each Hupu user's gender by scrutinising their profile and posting history. Only Q1-A136 was identified as a woman, and her post was excluded for analysis.⁶ We then adopted Lazar's (2007, p. 144) FCDA as the analytical framework, focusing on the 'interconnections between and the particularities of discursive strategies employed in various forms of social inequality and oppression that can feed back into critical feminist analysis.' To this end, we explored how three specific discursive strategies, including 'referential [nomination], 'predication,' and 'argumentation strategies,' constantly appear in social-mediated communication (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, p. 3,619), were invoked in male Hupu users' postings. A referential strategy refers to how a person or an object is named, and it serves as a starting point that permits an in-group/out-group membership to be defined (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017). A predication strategy involves making a statement through the attribution of specific characteristics to a subject, which renders the 'discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/processes and actions' (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 94). An argumentation strategy refers to how 'content-related warrants' are developed to bridge arguments and conclusions in a particular manner, 'and hence provide justification of the latter' (Richardson & Wodak, 2009, p. 255). Considering each post as the basic unit of data, we examined how Hupu users' lexical choices reflected one or more of the three discursive strategies that revealed their male gaze upon sportswomen in social-mediated interactions. Hupu users' personal information was anonymised throughout.

Analytical discussion

Sexualising sportswomen's bodies

As previously mentioned, Zhang Yufei is a Chinese swimmer, who achieved nationwide fame because of her outstanding athletic performance. After being awarded four Olympic medals, she became one of the most covered athletes in China's sports media at Tokyo 2020. The media's agenda-setting (Xu et al., 2018), by extension, made her a widely discussed sportswoman amongst male Chinese sports fans.

In the dataset, the sexualisation of Zhang was most apparently revealed by Hupu users' referential strategies, which often showcased an overt concentration on her physical appearance and body features. Given the national pride that Zhang generated, posts involving such referential instances were often composed in a positive tone, which marked the appreciation for the sportswoman amongst male Chinese sports fans. This trend was in line with the nationalist political trajectory of these male sports fans' engagement with international sporting events (Shen et al., 2021), despite it being complicated by the gendered lens, which Hupu users adopted to scrutinise the elite sportswoman's body.

Q1-A2: [Zhang] looks to be the naïve, white sweetie (傻白甜) type. [She] is so pretty.

Q1-A369: She is not [just] a naïve, white sweetie (傻白甜); she is so sweet!

As shown in the examples, postings about Zhang's appearance tended to refer to the athlete not by her name but by gendered designations, such as 'naïve, white sweetie.' Naïve, white sweetie is a Chinese-language Internet slang describing a particular type of desirable woman characterised by her attractive appearance and approachable personality. The slang defines both purity/virginity (naïve) and fair skin (white) as indicators of sexual attractiveness. This is not only consistent with China's patriarchal traditions but also informed by changing aesthetics shaped by the global fashion/beauty industries (Peng, 2022). Being invoked in Hupu users' textual production, it constituted a specific referential strategy, which centred around an immature, vulnerable imagination of Zhang. Such a referential strategy praised the sportswoman paradoxically by diminishing the physical strength that she displayed through excelling in competitive games.

Influenced by Japanese Kawaii culture, cuteness has a very different connotation in China compared with that in Euro-American societies. It entails a degree of rebellious spirit, challenging traditional gender norms in East Asia, where women's maturity is associated with family responsibilities (Chen & Machin, 2014). Yet, such a rebellious spirit shows little attempt to alter the patriarchal socio-economic structures, in which women's dependence on men is institutionalised (Wallis, 2018). As such, the cute representations of women are always constructed in the shadow of an alpha male. Such power dynamics were mostly subtextual in those positive postings but became apparent when negative commentaries were made on her sexualised body.

Q1-A338: [She] is so fxxxing strong! Who wants her? Do you want her at all? I am not talking about her added value as an Olympic [medallist] but her body figure.

Q1-A343: Her height, shoulder width, and wingspan are literally beyond what I can handle. I would leave her to stronger Hupu users.

As seen in the extracts, Q1-A338 predicated Zhang's lack of sexual value by qualifying her athletic accomplishments as a negative trait in romantic relationships. Such a predication was realised through a series of rhetorical questions, which insulted physically advantageous women as a whole. On this front, Q1-A343's posting served as an intertextual footnote, which constructed the Hupu user himself as one searching for ideal female partners, using a personalised imagination to further substantiate Q1-A338's predication. Speaking hypothetically on behalf of all heterosexual men, these negative postings emerged as the other side of the same coin, which revealed how sportswomen were objectified as sexual beings by male sports fans.

Considering that the threads were prompted by a question that encouraged Hupu users to imagine romantic encounters with Zhang, it was probably not surprising to detect volumes of posts involving an explicit, erotic fetishising of her body. Interestingly, the erotic fetishising was often juxtaposed with a self-reflective style of textual production. This juxtaposition articulated an interplay between the notions of authenticity and imagination in the male gaze upon elite sportswomen.

Authenticity has always been a key concept that helps to unpack identity politics in fandom cultures (Gao, 2016). For sports fans, authenticity is not only about their fan

identities within the sporting context but is also reflected in their consumption of mediated sports text, which allows them to project their worldview through juggling with the realism and the imagination of elite athletes (Shen et al., 2021). This style of self-reflective exercise often encourages male fans to contemplate their positions outside of the fandom, with a subtextual reference to the hierarchy of masculinities in wider society (Gong, 2016).

Q1-A1: What else can I do? Her smile looks so charming [好看], and I look so laughable [好笑].

[...]

Q1-A7: No chance at all. She is 177 [cm] tall, and her worth is 10 million [CNY]. She would not even look at a man without 1.8 [m] in height and 100 million [CNY] in cash.

[...]

Q1-A12: Bro, please say no more. Continue moving bricks [搬砖] because our foreman [工头] will come and check our work soon [A meme of a man's crying face].

[...]

Q1-A132: She is a universally recognised belle [校花]. I am a universally recognised dull [笑话].

As seen in the above extracts, the posting cycle started with Q1-A1's commentary, which exploited the phonetic similarities between the words – 'laugh' (笑) and 'look' (看). Relying on the rhyme to create a catchy pun, the post presented a self-reflective analysis, which placed the elite sportswoman and the Hupu user himself at two ends of the same spectrum. Similar patterns of textual production, such as those in Q1-A132's post, could be found in other posts, which duplicated the pattern of Q1-A1's textual production, with additional, repeated usages of the phrase – 'universally recognised,' being the most representative one on this front. As van Dijk (1997, p. 35) notes, repetition not only operates at the level of 'sounds (alliterations and rhymes)' or 'sentence forms (parallelisms)' but also 'draw[s] attention to preferred meanings [to] enhance [the] construction of such meanings in mental models.' This was clearly the case in Q1-A132's posting, which strategically repeated 'universally recognised' to underscore the irony of juxtaposing an elite sportswoman and an ordinary man, and to invite fellow Hupu users to mock his unrealistic, sexual desire for Zhang.

In Q1-A1 and Q1-A132's postings, the socio-economic dimension of the self-reflection was not literally defined. Yet, this was elaborated by fellow Hupu users, such as Q1-A7, who predicated the unrealistic nature of their imaginations by specifically materialising the criteria for Zhang's matching date, in both physical and economic terms. It was further underscored by Q1-A12, whose lexical choice adopted a popular Internet slang – 'moving bricks' (搬砖), to mock both himself and other Hupu users for their 'lack of marital value'. In particular, Q1-A12 appropriated a widespread meme on the Chinese-language Internet using the imagery of a crying man to visualise the mockery. The discursive practice was specific to social-mediated communication, in which visual artefacts emerged as cultural capitals that assist in the sense-making process between members of the same digital community (Fang & Repnikova, 2018).

In China, 'moving bricks' literally refers to the type of labour-intensive job vacancies available on construction sites. With such vacancies being filled overwhelmingly by

male rural-migrant workers, the lexical meanings of the term are rooted in the stereotypical portrayals of the members of this population segment, who often have low incomes and are discriminated against in society. Reassembled in popular cultural usage, the term has now become an alternative expression describing lower-class men. The term resonates with phrases, such as 'diaosi' (屌丝), which is indicative of men's anxieties about being marginalised in the process of social stratification in the post-reform era. Hupu users' reference to the term could be seen as Chinese men's 'reactions to their own subordination and marginalisation in their broader social experiences' (Gong, 2016, p. 28). It is in line with the evolution of the masculinity-crisis discourse, which aligns the model of desirable masculinities ever more closely with men's control over socio-economic resources (Song & Hird, 2014).

Q1-A3: Her life is complete if she could date me.

Q1-A4: [You] must have caught excessive internal heat. Let me use my urine to reduce it for you.

[...]

Q1-A139: [A visual artefact of two men urinating on another man lying on the floor].

However, Hupu users' self-deprecating style of self-reflection did not necessarily translate into their contemplation of issues associated with institutionalised patriarchal norms in their everyday lives. As revealed in the above extracts, the posting cycle started with Q1-A3 putting forward his unrealistic sexual desire for Zhang and was followed by Q1-A4 and Q1-139, who used written words and visual artefacts, respectively, to communicate their willingness to be the 'buzz killer', who would bring the former back to reality.⁷ Q1-A4 and Q1-A139's postings not only confirmed how different semiotic items converge in discursive practices (Fairclough, 2016) but also showcased how Hupu users' self-reflective exercise took place at a superficial level, which merely circled around the realism and the imagination of the romantic encounters between Zhang and ordinary Chinese men. The self-deprecation established in postings was a reflection of social media users' apolitical discursive practices, in which the playfulness of textual production was most appreciated (Ren & Guo, 2021). In such discursive practices, the objectification and sexualisation of sportswomen's bodies were taken for granted without any critical scrutiny.

Trivialising sportswomen's accomplishments

As a playmaker in the Brazilian women's team, Marta's athletic accomplishments are recognised by professional bodies, evidenced by the six Best FIFA Women's Player awards displayed on her honour shelf. With consecutive 3 min of footage and 6 gifs capturing Marta's impressive football skills, the original posts generated the threads of 281 posts. They, thus, became the topics relating to a foreign sportswoman at Tokyo 2020 with the highest degree of engagement on Hupu.

Q2-A1: [Marta] is the true greatest player of all time in women's football.

The threads beneath the original posts prompted numerous follow-up commentaries, which praised Marta's excellent football skills. While such positive commentaries formed the least problematic collection of posts, some, such as the one by Q2-A1, still revealed a

sexist undertone by predicating Marta as the greatest player but only within the context of women's games. Such a predication implicitly communicated male Hupu users' collective mentalities of the superiority of men's sports by suggesting football as a male profession by default.

It is worthwhile noting that the posts were generated after Marta's debut at Tokyo 2020 in which she scored twice and left the Chinese team with a five-nil humiliating defeat. Hupu users' highly positive sentiment towards the rival of their national team was not necessarily an outlier in the nationalist axis of male Chinese fans' sports consumption (Shen et al., 2021). Instead, it coincided with the criticisms of a state-planned sporting system in football by Chinese fans, who tended to align themselves with elite European professional clubs and deemed the commercialisation of European football as the reasoning behind its flourishing (Stride & Vandenberg, 2019). The trajectory of such criticisms was contextualised against the backdrop of the CCP's four-decade, market-led economic reforms. These facilitated the penetration of neoliberal capitalist values in people's social lives (Wallis, 2018), as well as the disappointment amongst Chinese football fans specifically caused by the failures of their national football teams (Stride & Vandenberg, 2019).

Setting the topic of sports nationalism aside, what made Hupu users' postings interesting was the gender dynamics revealed in the threads.

Q2-A48: [Marta] has two nicknames: Pelé in a skirt and female Ronaldinho.

Q2-A23: Marta in women's football is equivalent to Pelé or Maradona in men's football. [I] do not accept any refutation. None of the other [female footballers] is near the top-30 level in men's football.

Q2-258: Speaking of her accomplishments and status, she is a female Messi.

Q2-A36: One by one: Zidane, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Kaka [A series of gifs capturing Marta's dribbling tricks].

A referential strategy, which referred to Marta, not by her real name, but a gendered designation, which collocated the names of well-known male footballers with either a female prefix or a metonymy of women, was adopted in most Hupu users' postings. Such a referential strategy was not only specific to written texts but might be invoked through visual aids, as reflected in Q2-A36's posting. This posting captioned four gifs featuring Marta's football skills, but with the names of male celebrity footballers. Considering that the Hupu platform was mainly populated by male fans of European men's football (Sohu, 2020), the lexical choices of these posts had practical communicative functions, which potentially made the texts more relatable to fellow Hupu users through referencing household names. Yet, such lexical choices were simultaneously indicative of the gendered fashion of Hupu users' assessments of sportswomen, which often turned her biological sex to the forefront. They arbitrarily defined Marta in relation to other sportsmen, since excellence in sport was stereotypically associated with men (Xu et al., 2018). In the meantime, they also anonymised Marta in social-mediated sports fandom communication, which was consistent with the underrepresentation of sportswomen in the media (Billings & Butterworth, 2021).

Q2-A134: [She] has excellent balance and strength, and her techniques are masculinised. Playing in women's football, [she] is 'bullying' everyone else.

Q2-A9: Marta grew up playing football with boys. It is a shame that Brazilian women's football is not as developed as the US.

With the gendered assessments of sporting excellence being naturalised, Marta's outlier, outstanding performance was spectacularised as an abnormal phenomenon. As shown in Q2-A134's posting, this sporting value encouraged a masculine representation of Marta, which alienated her from the embodiment of athletic womanhood. In the same vein, Q2-A9 predicated that Marta's successes were a result of her experience of playing with male footballers. The predication was substantiated by an implicit prerequisite, which considered men superior to women in sport. With over 100 upvotes, the posting, which underestimated women's professional abilities in generic terms, emerged as an insult to all sportswomen, despite its share of positive notes on a single elite sportswoman.

Q2-A18: Can top female footballers play in men's football leagues? For instance, can any single one of them play as a starting XI in the English Football League Two or even League One?

[...]

Q2-A21: None of them can play against professional [male] footballers, not even in low-level leagues. Female-male discrepancies are huge.

[...]

Q2-A78: It is not possible at all. Women and men share different levels of body strength. Do not exaggerate [Marta].

In accordance with the general contempt for women's sports, male Hupu users' postings revealed a stylised trivialisation of sportswomen's accomplishments. Such a trivialisation exploited and fed into men's arguments that attempted to rationalise their gendered superiority in sport. This was most apparently reflected in the follow-up commentaries beneath Q2-A18's post. With a hypothetical question that invited fellow Hupu users to compare women's and men's football, multiple strings of follow-up commentaries were prompted to rationalise the gender hierarchy in sport. Highlighting the existence of such gender gaps, such commentaries invoked biological terms to justify the superiority of men's athletic value, offering a glimpse of the scientific rationalisation embedded in male Hupu users' argumentation strategies.

Q2-A131: Male mammals are always stronger. This is for the sake of survival and is the law of nature, which cannot be shaken even by the emergence of human civilisation. Men were born with advantageous body strength, and they should not think about their superiority and playing against women. I feel that a decent man has already lost when he has such a thought [as playing against women in sport].

According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 116), scientific rationalisation refers to mobilising 'differentiated bodies of knowledge' to 'legitimate institutional practices.' It is a commonly used argumentation strategy, which justifies an argument with references to (pseudo)-scientific evidence (Yu & Tian, 2022). To this end, Q2-A131's posting served as an intertextual elaboration of the (pseudo)scientific rationalisation-based argumentation strategies being adopted by Hupu users. Specifically, the post put forward Q2-A131's argument

by using the female-male differences of mammals as a metaphor. Instead of offering a contextualised discussion of the biological specifics, the metaphor was followed by a vulgarised interpretation of evolution to validate the hierarchical order of women and men in human society. While devising a concession, which seemingly admitted the possibility of men's failures in cross-gender contests, the post reconciled with women in a rather patronising tone, making the insult on the female cohort both explicit and blatant. The post was generated as a response to the comparison between women's and men's sports, but the specificities of the sporting context were absent in the textual production per se. Such a lexical choice exposed the undertone of male sports fans' gender political agenda.

In contemporary feminist literature, the social construction of sex is widely recognised (McRobbie, 2009). Ironically, in post-reform China, the outdated, essentialist understanding of such concepts has undergone a process of resurgence, as both an ideological backlash against the CCP's gender-neutral, collectivist social governance during Mao's era and a pragmatical result of the restructured market economy that has legitimated gender discrimination at an infrastructural level (Wallis, 2018). The revival of sex essentialism comes against the backdrop of exacerbated social stratification that has effectively entrenched lower men's gender privileges (Yang, 2010). Alongside the penetration of the masculinity-crisis discourse (Liu, 2019; Song & Hird, 2014) and the increase of women's consumer power in visible popular cultures (Bouvier & Chen, 2021; Zhao & Bouvier, 2022), it has created a popular misperception of men being disadvantaged in China, which is shared by the male cohort (Liu et al., 2021). In this sense, male Chinese fans' trivialisation of elite sportswomen's accomplishments marks their attempt to reclaim male hegemony outside of the sporting context, as their sense of insecurity is heightened in the power dynamics of post-socialist gender politics.

Conclusion

Adopting an FCDA approach, we have analysed the Chinese male gaze upon sportswomen, using male Hupu users' postings about two elite sportswomen as case studies. Due to the long-established hierarchical order in the sports media, public attention to sportswomen only significantly increased at the Olympics. At Tokyo 2020, many sportswomen, both foreign and Chinese, became household names, or returned to the media spotlight because of their outstanding performances. As always, such fame gradually fades away after the Olympics, but they were indeed superstars throughout the summer of 2021 when the sports media devoted their full attention to the megaevent. Social-mediated communication concerning these elite sportswomen offers scope to foreground male Chinese sports fans' gendering of women's sports, which dialectically relates to post-socialist gender politics unfolding in wider society.

In the case study of Zhang, we have unpacked how male Hupu users sexualise the elite sportswoman through referential strategies and predication strategies which are dedicated to the assessments of her physical appearance and sexual value, rather than her athletic accomplishments. It is undeniable that there are male Hupu users exploiting the posting opportunity to exercise a self-reflective analysis of their socio-economic positions, and this self-reflective mode of commentating often encourages fellow male Hupu users' engagement. However, such a self-reflective analysis only occurs at a superficial level,

which points towards the playfulness of their sexualisation of elite sportswomen rather than their contemplation of structural gender inequality. This trend coincides with the objectification of sportswomen in the sports media in both China and the West, as documented in existing scholarship (Xu & Kreshel, 2020).

In the case study of Marta, we have scrutinised how male Hupu users trivialise the elite sportswoman's achievements. Such a trivialisation is accomplished by their use of referential strategies and predication strategies that prompt comparison of sportswomen with sportsmen, which marginalises the former's embodiment of ideal athletic qualities. Under these circumstances, we have seen male Hupu users' increased engagement with the posts that somehow challenge the sexualised male gaze upon sportswomen's bodies, but such challenges do not alter their collective mentalities of sportsmen's superiority. In particular, their postings often point towards the development of argumentation strategies serving to legitimise the gender hierarchy. Such discursive practices feed into an essentialist understanding of sex, which is evidently well-received in Chinese society today (Fung & Zhang, 2011; Wallis, 2018), showcasing how gender power relations persist in male fans' social-mediated sports consumption.

In contrast to other forms of popular cultural content, in which women's consumer power plays a greater role in shaping gender representations (Qiao & Wang, 2019), sports fandom is still entrenched as a masculine terrain where male values prevail, despite growing numbers of sportswomen and female sports fans having introduced new dynamics to the sporting world (Gong, 2017). Against this backdrop, Chinese-language sports fandom platforms often become an extended field, where men's visions of gender power relations are discursively communicated and negotiated, as a result of their self-reflective style of sports consumption (Gong, 2016). The male gaze upon sportswomen is not limited to the sporting context but serves as an epitome of patriarchal social norms being entrenched in wider Chinese society. It underscores Chinese men's insecurity about their socio-economic positions due to their gender privileges being eroded by the worsening of social stratification (Liu et al., 2021; Song & Hird, 2014). This insecurity fuels Chinese men's support for the legitimising of patriarchal values in the process of the market-oriented economic reforms (Liu 2019), and becomes a proxy for their gender politics that reveals their sexist views and misogynist behaviours.

The outcomes of the research also contribute to an emerging body of FCDA literature developed upon Fairclough's (2013) theorisation of DRA. Rooted in a transdisciplinary quest, DRA, or CDA in general, strives to conduct socially relevant research to scaffold progressive politics (Fairclough, 2016). However, considering the personal interests of the founding theorists, such as Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak, in state politics, classic CDA scholarship tends to provide a limited acknowledgement of gender issues in its theoretical scope. This situation calls for the recognition of a feminist standpoint in CDA studies beyond an elite-discourse-focused research paradigm (Lazar, 2007). On this note, this article, which situates itself at the intersection of CDA and feminist studies of everyday life, also emerges as a response to Lazar's (2017) call by providing a theoretical and methodological experiment of FCDA in the context of Chinese sports fandom studies. We advise future studies to further this line of research to both unleash the full potential of CDA as a theoretical and analytical approach to analysing popular cultural texts, and to account for the pivotal role social-mediated sports consumption plays in people's leisure lives today.

Notes

1. China boycotted the Olympics between 1956 and 1979 for the ICO's recognition of Taiwan as an independent country and the 1980 Moscow edition for Russia's invasion of Afghanistan.
2. In fandom culture, the word 'ship' stands for relationship and can be used as a verb, meaning to endorse a romantic relationship.
3. Retrieved 30th August 2021 from <https://bbs.hupu.com/44454786.html>
4. Retrieved 25th August 2021 from <https://bbs.hupu.com/44328003.html>
5. Retrieved 5th September 2021 from <https://bbs.hupu.com/44320812.html>
6. The post reads: '[She] looks a bit like Jay Chou [a Taiwanese singer].'
7. Q1-A4 and Q1-139 were referring to a pseudoscientific belief in China, which suggested that internal heat could lead to one being sexually aroused and drinking children's urine could reduce such internal heat.

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