Media Campaign Proposal for Zhu Yi: Crisis Repair and Image Reconstruction in the Chinese Sports Landscape

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Abstract: This media campaign proposal outlines a comprehensive strategy for crisis repair and image reconstruction for Zhu Yi, a figure skater who faced backlash after a disappointing performance at the 2022 Winter Olympics. The proposal aims to leverage Zhu's Chinese identity and capitalize on the surging interest in sports in China to rebuild her image and establish her as a successful athlete. By aligning Zhu with the government-supported initiatives to develop and commercialize the sports industry, the campaign seeks to tap into the growing audience for winter sports in China. The proposal emphasizes the importance of authenticity and individual sovereignty in shaping Zhu's media image, focusing on her personal achievements and story of resilience. It recommends coordinated efforts with domestic media outlets, independent streaming platforms, and social media channels to engage both existing and new fans, creating an emotional connection between Zhu and her audience. The crisis analysis highlights the rapid response by authorities and the appearance of support for Zhu, indicating the potential for successful crisis repair. The proposal addresses the challenges of Zhu's perceived privileged background, linguistic proficiency, and authenticity, suggesting strategies to make her relatable and appealing to a wider Chinese audience.

Keywords: Crisis repair, image reconstruction, Media campaign, Chinese sports industry, Winter sports, Authenticity, emotional connection, Chinese identity, Media platforms.

1. Introduction

This is a media campaign proposal for Zhu Yi to solve her current crisis that has mainly taken form in social media presented by G-Star company. We want to build the image of another successful athlete that goes even further than our previous client Eileen Gu. She is an important factor in this campaign because she was in almost exactly the same position as Zhu in the Olympics but managed to find success on both the cultural and professional front. The welcome of the Chinese public is, as we will show, “conditional on maintaining their stellar performance” (“Chinese social media”, 2022). Eileen Gu met these conditions and social media rewarded her for it. Gu is living proof that Chinese sports audiences are primed to accept an athlete so long as they are able to perform.

During the 2022 Winter Olympics, the figure skater chosen to represent the People's Republic of China, Zhu Yi, finished last during her team event after falling twice during the women's single section of the event. China ended up placing fifth overall. Zhu left the event in tears, and would later tell reporters she believed these experiences would make her stronger (“Figure Skating”, 2022). However Zhu Yi came to grips with her performance at the 2022 Winter Olympics, it was clear that she had been under considerable scrutiny judging by the ferocity of the backlash that followed. There already had been some unsavory accusations about Zhu using her father to get placed on a team she does not belong to. This allegation went wild as it satisfied human interest in controversies (Sherwood et al., 2017). Sports and geopolitics, identity and tradition, the latest chapter in Zhu Yi's story intersects with all of these domains. Mocked as an inauthentic Chinese person and poor figure skater, Zhu has her work cut out for her if she wants to repair her tarnished image.

Our company values authenticity and individual sovereignty. Thus, We are not going to manipulate Zhu's behavior, but help her construct a favorable media image based on what she is doing and standing to do. With this in mind, we are in a position to go over the solution we have proposed in detail.

2. Overview of our Goals

The solution we propose is simple. Zhu Yi should fully embrace her Chinese identity in order to make use of the unique cultural resources available in her ethnic homeland. The Chinese do not hold a grudge, and Zhu Yi has already given up her American citizenship. It was already clear from the official response to the backlash that Zhu has supporters in the government and domestic press. Ahead of her performance in the Olympics, media outlets called her a “skating prodigy” who chose to represent China over America (“Chinese social media”, 2022). It is important that the media is seen doing this. They promote Zhu's image as an elite athlete that chose to represent the People's Republic of China over the United States of her own free will. The solution we propose will coordinate with the domestic Chinese press and independent streaming platforms to finalize Zhu Yi's transition into a Chinese citizen in the eyes of her audience.

We propose to do this by capitalizing on China's surging interest in sports. According to our data, the Winter Olympics in which Zhu Yi competed was viewed by over 600 million Chinese viewers (Ip, 2022). This is no small market. What is happening here is not just another crisis repair job. We are hoping to position Zhu Yi higher than she has ever been before by riding the wave of a new and vibrant sports market.

We are not just looking to get Zhu Yi in through the door with raw athletic performance. The Winter Olympics proved that people were interested in “human stories”, especially the human stories involving US-born athletes representing China (Ip, 2022). In a word, people want an emotional connection to
the athletes they are watching. Emotion can also lead to an attachment for the athlete (Dwyer et al., 2018). Zhu Yi is the underdog after her showing in Beijing 2022. She has much to gain, and very little to lose. Social media has no doubt fanned the flames of athlete popularity. According to a board member of the United States Association of China, social media promotion of the Olympics even drew in viewers who would not normally be interested in winter sports (Ip, 2022). The right media campaigns promoted on the right platforms will attract old and new fans alike to Zhu Yi's story of resilience in the face of adversity and national scrutiny.

We have China’s own government to thank for these record turnouts. In 2014, the state decided to “re-orient” the Chinese sports industry with the goal of creating an industry that could generate 100 billion dollars in revenue by 2025 (“Sports in China”, 2020). What this means is the mass commercialization of the industry through investment in athletic facilities and the marketing of sports products. Social media recognition combined with state-backed commercialization is creating a perfect storm for Zhu Yi’s potential comeback.

We want to emphasize that these initiatives were also implemented in the winter sports industry. After Beijing was selected to host the 2022 Winter Games, the CCP’s winter sports development plan was intended “to have 650 skating rinks and at least 800 ski resorts by 2022, laying the foundation for a total industry value of 1 trillion yuan [USD 136 billion] by 2025” (“China’s Winter Sports”). These numbers were simply unheard of just two decades ago. We see that the rising popularity of winter sports is not just some social media phenomenon but tangibly supported by the state itself.

The pandemic has brought a wave of digital streaming for sports. Additionally, as most of China’s sports infrastructure is concentrated in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, many sports fans have no other option than to tune in on a streaming platform. As of 2020, the number of online subscribers reached 213 million (“Sports in China”). This represents an enormous number of potential winter sports fans, and as such, a tremendous audience for our new media campaign.

Besides Zhu Yi’s social media and official channels, we recommend targeting the following three platforms. Our first choice is Tencent Sports for two reasons. The first is that it is an independent company: it is a spin-off of social media giant Tencent. Since our media campaign will consist of a series of coordinated interviews designed to prove that Zhu Yi has embraced her Chinese identity, the interviews would not appear authentic if they appeared on a state-run website.

Secondly, since Tencent is the NBA’s official partner in China, the potential audience is enormous given that there are allegedly 500 million NBA fans in the mainland (“Sports in China”). The only issue we have with Tencent is that we do not want to risk subjecting Zhu Yi to an unreceptive audience when she is sorely in need of momentum. Winter sports is a new craze in China, so it remains to be seen if it will find a home among Tencent or the other platforms which we will describe now.

Our second and third choices are PP Sports and Sina Sports. As of September 2019, PP Sports boasts over 6 million paying subscribers. It caters to sports and wrestling fans. Sina Sports' official count alone has nearly 24 million followers and holds the broadcast rights to the “Professional Golf Association Tour (PGA), the Championship, Wimbledon, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, and the National Basketball League of Australia” (“Sports in China”). We only mention all these events to highlight Sina’s broadcast diversity. Where other platforms might seem insufficient in one aspect or another, Sina Sports at least draws a large and varied Chinese sports audience.

To sum up, government-backed initiatives to commercialize and improve the Chinese sports industry as well as the popularity of these events on social media guarantees us a fertile ground for crisis repair. We recommend concentrating the bulk of the campaign on Sina Sports, Zhu Yi’s social media (primarily her Weibo), domestic media outlets in Shanghai and Beijing, and Tencent Sports. This would guarantee cross-penetration across several markets.

What we are good at is knowing which way the wind is blowing. We know how audiences can be influenced by “human stories”, and we know how to broadcast these stories on the right platforms.

More than anything, what we are good at is taking the long view when it comes to crisis repair. Zhu Yi has the ingredients for a classic comeback in the world of sports, and this is a world that is finally revealing itself to China in all its glory. Zhu Yi is not just another athlete trying to get her name out in an oversaturated industry. She stands at the beginning of an era, and she could define that era if she decides to put her faith in our team. More details about this campaign will follow shortly, but at this time, it would be helpful to go over the reaction to Zhu Yi in closer detail.

3. Crisis Analysis

Not only was the response by authorities decisive, but it was rapid. After Zhu fell, “the hashtag #ZhuYiFellDown was viewed more than 230 million times on […]. Weibo […] before censors stepped in” on Monday (Dou, 2022). Hu Xijin, a former editor of a state-run tabloid, immediately “urged positivity” in a post that received 130,000 likes. Hu got to the heart of the matter when he said that this “sports-based reverse immigration” is a sign of the times. In other words, the state is not intrinsically opposed to a naturalized athlete like Zhu Yi representing them in the Olympics. Zhu's father himself is a computer scientist whose career has “straddled the United States and China” (Dou, 2022). If the state is not opposed to working with professionals like Zhu Yi's father, then an athlete is not off the table. If the state is on board, the people will follow. Whether this popular support is real, artificial, or both, is beside the point. So long as there is an appearance of support for Zhu, crisis repair is already in effect.

The ruling ideology must unconditionally support the athletes that represent it, or lose face. If state authorities turned their back on Zhu, they would either be seen as indecisive or admitting to corruption.

A simple survey of the kinds of comments made about Zhu pinpoints the problem and possible roads to a solution. One Weibo user asked if this was really the best China could do
(“Censors step in”, 2022). Others were even more vicious, calling her “shameless”, “rotten”, and an “embarrassment” (Qin, 2022). Yet others criticized her inability to speak fluent Mandarin (Walker-Roberts, 2022). We consider this the priority in repairing Zhu Yi’s image as an authentic Chinese person.

It is important to note that Zhu Yi’s lack of exposure which shows her fluency in Mandarin was a problem even in the lead-up to the Olympics. Thus, while it is important to remember how much support she had from domestic media outlets, it is also important to remember that criticism was brewing beneath the surface even then. While some were “speechless” that these posts were censored so quickly, there were still regular Weibo users who urged good sense. It is important that Zhu Yi draws on this demographic of her supporters. If she wants to disassociate herself from her so-called privileged background, then she should not rely on high-ranking officials or business people to make her case for her.

As part of the domestic media campaign, Zhu could also continue to bolster her social media presence to make her more relatable to this type of person. At every stage of this process, Zhu Yi must appear as authentic as possible. Any hint of artificiality and the Chinese audience will probably accuse her of working with the state and its propaganda machine. We want to rehabilitate Zhu Yi’s image in the eyes of China without the taint of propaganda.

3.1. Crisis Repair Overview

In the digital era, because of the media interest, a crisis can be long lastingly damaging for an athlete if not addressed (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 219). Thus, our plan for repairing Zhu’s image is in need. Crisis repair is the art of repairing one’s image and/or reputation in the wake of a situation that might lead to something undesirable. Image is how “an athlete wishes to be perceived by others”, which is short-term, while reputation “is a long-lasting belief” based on consistent patterns of an athlete’s behavior (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 216). Image and reputation can be intertwined with one another and jointly utilized. Our goal is to repair her image as an authentic Chinese and furthermore, help her build a reputation as a leading figure skater.

Zhu’s flawed performance at the recent Olympics was what ignited the firestorm of the crisis on social media, and the controversies around her background further added fuel to the fire. In this case, her reputation seemed to be a “privileged athlete”, which negatively affected her image. As we divide the crisis of Zhu into two parts, it is important to note the relationship between image and reputation. In this case, being Chinese is a necessary cause, while the sufficient cause is her sports performance.

3.2. Identity and Nationalism in Sports

Although we have separated the cultural aspect from the crisis, it is still not a simple affair. Identity and nationalism can be delicate subjects in the world of sports. “Identity refers to a person’s sense of belonging” to a particular group (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 168). The definition points out how the individuals themselves feel about their relationship with the group. Thus, the vital factor is one’s own recognition and construction of identity.

Nevertheless, we are here in consideration of external factors. Since the proposal is based on making use of Chinese values to facilitate the crisis repair, it would be helpful to understand some of the values. First, Chinese culture features a long-term orientation, which “values persistence and adaptability.” (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 173) Thus, Chinese sports culture is not prone to the media cycles that dominate sports coverage because the state acts as an administrator. In other words, the state will not let the outrage in the media get too occupied with one event or one person. Rather, content consistent with traditional values can go well. Second, contrary to what the US culture values as focusing on specific star players, the history of authoritarianism in China diminishes individualism (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 172). However, that does not necessarily mean denying individuality. In China, a person’s status such as a daughter can define her duties in society. Individuals do their part to contribute to a greater whole of unified understanding. Third, Chinese sports culture is restraint, which has an emphasis on “stricter moral disciplines, less sport participation, and stricter sexual mores.” (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 174) In such cases, the media always shows the appropriate amount of respect that one would expect from a more traditionally-minded culture. It is the respect, collectivism, and persistence of Chinese values that we can rely on to build our campaign proposal in repairing Zhu Yi’s image.

Zhu Yi is in a difficult situation because she is trying to let go of her American identity and integrate into a relatively more restrained culture. However, as argued by the famous scholar Stuart Hall, identity is not static; it is “constructed and reconstructed within […] discourse or communication.” (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 168) This proposal puts this concept into practice by implementing a series of short-lived media campaigns designed to reconstruct Beverly Zhu as Zhu Yi in the eyes of her audience, particularly the Chinese audience.

3.3. Campaign Overview

Our target audience is mainly the Chinese middle class in urban areas. Our venues are going to be domestic media outlets such as TV programmes, newspapers, and their accounts on social media. Also, Zhu Yi’s own social media page can serve as complementary. We will conduct a series of theme videos or interviews featuring various aspects of Zhu Yi’s image aside from skating. For instance, from a culturally appealing perspective, we have options including practicing calligraphy, reading ancient poetry, or visiting historical sites, etc. It is imperative that Zhu speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese during these videos to implicitly express her identity being a Chinese. The goal here is to portray her as a well-rounded person, but not at the cost of her performance. The audience would always appreciate a comprehensive image of being a high-level athlete with a rich life.

It is important to control the amount of media coverage as well. Zhu’s social media account should not be flooded with daily show interviews or talk show appearances. Because if so, the audience could sense a hint of desperation. We want the recovery of Zhu’s image to be as organic as possible. Thus, we also do not advise any explicit endorsements at such a critical stage. Throughout the process of our media campaign, we will measure the progress by Baidu (a Chinese search engine similar to Google) searches. The further down the page that the images of her falling at the Olympic and the controversial news appear, the better stage she is at in rehabilitating her image. Crisis repair depends on subtle techniques and makes changes gradually. Nowadays, any attempt to force the issue could be immediately discernible to
When it comes to controversial topics such as the allegations about her father’s connections, it is wise to avoid talking about them. As Songchun Zhu holds high status in the academic field, it is natural for people to imagine his power, and to link it to Zhu Yi, especially after her Olympic debacle. Under such circumstances, either explicit confirmation or denial of his involvement in Zhu’s selection for the Chinese women’s singles team will only fuel speculation. Instead, it should be treated as a non-issue, irrelevant to an athlete only trying to improve her standing in the field of sports. As Chinese traditional culture values persistence, the image of an athlete dedicated, stoic athlete working hard to overcome the past failure is what the audience would favor, and exactly what the proposal is trying to promote.

Another asset, also an advantage, that Zhu Yi possesses is her youth. It is abnormal for a 20-year-old girl to face such pressure. Until now, based on our monitoring, much of the support she has received on social media was defense on the basis of her age and the enormous pressure she must have been under. Essentially, it comes down to the fact that Zhu is at a time in her life when people will be more tolerant of her and forgiving of her mistakes. We can utilize this in repairing her image.

Last but not least, a considerable aspect of the campaigns should highlight the “underdog” angle. Zhu has to accept the consequences of her performance and continue working hard to prove herself. She is in the accidental crisis of not being able to maintain her stellar track record. This type of crisis is not much destructive to one’s image, but still in need of a timely resolution (Owumemchili, 2018, p. 217). She must back up her genuine interest in China with an outstanding performance on the ice. The success in appealing to culture does not mean anything without the foundation of professional success, while in turn, her professional success will be diminished if the Chinese audience does not accept her as a part of the Chinese team. In absorbing the culture, the impression that we want to cultivate is a future Chinese icon on the ice.

3.4. Campaign Dimensions

In designing the campaigns to address the issues, some distinct aspects emerge. The first angle is to express the national identity properly. To fully embrace Zhu’s Chinese identity, we can signal a fundamental change with the right use of phrases. Beverly Zhu is an English name representing her identity being born and raised in the US, which is not favorable in the Chinese context. Instead, the Chinese name Zhu Yi should fully occupy the press. Parallely, China is not only the country that Zhu is competing for, but we also want to stress that it is her “homeland”. These subtle changes in the press can infuse her Chinese identity in the audience’s heart. In addition, culture involves lifestyles. On Chinese traditional festivals, social media users would appreciate greetings. Even the food and drink she consumes will play a role in conveying culture. Instead of posting pictures having coffee, we recommend expressing an enjoyment for traditional Chinese food, Chinese tea, and Chinese pastry. As mentioned in our pitch, giving up coffee for tea can be a symbolic move, also being native to China. It appears as if she is giving up the Western lifestyle for the calm and stable traditional Chinese culture. Once the image appealing to culture is established, we would further consider domestic brands’ endorsement as well.

Second, while we stressed the importance of avoiding confronting the perception of her privilege, we would also like to take this opportunity to be more proactive and spread a positive image in her implicit denial of it. We don’t want her father’s academic achievements to get in the way of her accomplishments on a purely athletic level as well as her reputation. We want to promote her as a normal girl in a normal family like everyone else and as she really is. The traditional holiday posts we recommended could feature her family members or the home cooking dishes, which not only aligns with the Chinese traditional value of family reunion, but also diminishes the alleged privilege. Even if unfortunately she cannot go home for the sake of training, she can still express how she misses her family, which could echo with millions of audiences who have to work or study away from home.

Outside of the family, we want to stress that skating is just an occupation for Zhu; being in the national team does not make her high in the clouds. She also has an ordinary life as a college student, strolling on the streets, eating at corner stores, complaining about assignments, and including doing sports – training, which can be recorded and shared through plogs or vlogs. This practice could make her identity, an athlete with world-class skills, more relatable. It would also be helpful if she could develop a dialect on top of her fluent Mandarin because it exists in a smaller group. People who speak that dialect will feel more intimate to her, and people who don’t can also find her image more amiable. Within the progress of our campaigns, if at any point the audience decides to award her an affectionate nickname, we will definitely promote that. The value of a simple nickname lies in the distinctiveness that it creates (Cunningham & Eys, 2007). It can serve as a code word between her and the audience, implying that she has graduated to a high level of recognition among the Chinese public.

Although Zhu Yi leading her normal daily life as the public is the image we are trying to promote, we still need to distinguish her as an elite athlete from her peers to build her reputation. This is particularly crucial after her mistake at the Olympics, followed by the question on her ability. According to the state’s official announcement, Zhu Yi is the only Chinese female single skater who can complete 3 Salchow + 3 Toeloop + SEQ with a high quality, and this can be branded as her signature movement (Li, 2022). The signature movement can not only justify her selection to the national team, but also aids her reputation as an irreplaceable athlete. If fortunately, she excels at her following tournament, she can make a great turnaround, and the Chinese audience loves the story of phoenix nirvana.

3.5. Contingency Plan

A contingency plan completes a crisis repair package. While the media campaign actively repairs the athlete’s image, the contingency plan exists to prevent any possible future damage to it. Specifically, it is the embers on social media that this plan aims to prevent because it is the most damaging to an athlete’s image and reputation with the rapid spread of message. A contingency plan should presuppose the crisis for the athlete, and in this case, we need to prepare for Zhu Yi’s possible poor performance in the future.

The relevant publics we identified involve neutral sports fans and Zhu’s sympathizers. This process is critical as “each
public may require a different kind of message response, and it is also important to avoid a situation where messages can become contradictory.” (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 221) In case of another accidental crisis, Zhu can address the more hardcore, traditional sports fans by accepting the fact she failed to live up to the country’s expectation rather than simply denial or doubling down. She should graciously respect her failure to perform well, acknowledge her shortcomings, and assure her audience that she will do better next time with the dedication to training hard and a plan for improvement.

Ideally, the media campaign should completely change the dynamic between Zhu and her audience, which would gradually become her sympathizers. She should not be seen as a naturalized athlete still trying to appeal to the skeptical audience. Instead, she should be seen as a beloved Chinese athlete to get back into the grace of the audience after a minor disappointment. This attempt tries to recontextualize the crisis as “not important to the audience.” (Onwumechili, 2018, p. 222) If Zhu has already won the approval as a normal Chinese athlete, her performance will only and strictly be a performance issue, a temporary setback. She should guarantee her supporters that she is still the athlete they respect and she will continue to work hard to be worthy of their respect. The worst social media outrage that she experienced after the 2022 Olympics will never happen again.

4. Conclusion

Zhu Yi’s crisis brought by her performance at the 2022 Winter Olympics was unfortunate, but not impossible to recover from. What is fortunate is that she is striving to integrate into a culture whose forgiveness is conditional on stellar performance and respect paid to their culture. If Zhu, as a fully Chinese, makes the effort to demonstrate her ability and continue excelling at her sports in the bloom of the industry, she can truly win the audience’s heart to support her. With a little work, her future is in her hands.

References