

The Association Between New Media Environmental Stimuli and Chinese Athletes' Mental Health: An Environmental Psychology Perspective

Hening Wang, Chun Zhang, Ruifeng Liu*

Faculty of Health and Wellness, City University of Macau, Macao, 999078, China

*Corresponding author: Ruifeng Liu, lrff@qq.com

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Abstract: With the development of new media technology, the social environment in which athletes reside has undergone a fundamental transformation. Based on the perspective of environmental psychology, this study analyzes how the environmental characteristics of new media influence athletes' mental health. The study finds that the new media environment forms systemic pressure on athletes across three dimensions: physical, social, and temporal. Specifically, the high-intensity information stimuli in the physical dimension increase cognitive load and induce anxiety; the public evaluation and polarized public opinion in the social dimension lead to a surge in social pressure and a decline in self-efficacy; and the continuity in the temporal dimension causes a substantial depletion of psychological resources. In the Chinese cultural context, collectivist values, shame culture (Face), and expectations of moral perfection further amplify the negative impacts caused by the new media environment. Therefore, this study emphasizes that protecting athletes' mental health cannot rely solely on individual-level interventions but requires regulation and management at the environmental level. This research provides a theoretical basis for understanding athletes' mental health issues in the new media era and offers practical references for optimizing the ecological environment of competitive sports.

Keywords: New Media Environment; Athlete Mental Health; Environmental Psychology; Cultural Moderation; Environmental Stimuli

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1. Introduction

In the development process of Chinese competitive sports in the new era, building a leading sports nation is a crucial goal in the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country. Under this strategic guidance, the sports demeanor (or sports image) has been placed in a more central position than competitive results alone. In competition scenarios, athletes' speech and deportment, performance under pressure, and the manifestation of sportsmanship have become important dimensions for measuring the development of Chinese sports. Athletes' mental state is the core prerequisite for shaping a positive sports demeanor; this state is not only a key determinant of competitive performance but also directly affects the tangible expression of sportsmanship. However, the media environment in which athletes are situated has undergone a fundamental transformation in the past decade, bringing unprecedented challenges to athletes' mental health.

For a long time, sport psychology research has mainly focused on the relationship between anxiety and performance in

competitive settings. However, this traditional perspective primarily focuses on internal stressors, often overlooking the critical impact of broader organizational environments and social factors on athletes. The rise of new media technologies, represented by social media, has fundamentally changed the ecological environment in which athletes exist. The new media environment refers to a digitized and networked communication ecological environment composed of social media platforms, instant messaging tools, and short video platforms. Unlike the one-way communication, professional gatekeeping, and delayed reporting of traditional media, Jenkins points out that the new media environment has formed a participatory culture, characterized by the ability of anyone to produce and disseminate content, the diffusion of information across social networks, and the immediate occurrence of feedback and commentary. These three characteristics together constitute a brand-new communication environment. Its impact on individual psychology no longer stops at the level of passive information reception but forms a field of continuous operation and multi-party interaction, resulting in the dissolution of athletes' individual boundaries. In the new media environment, athletes' training, competitions, and private lives exist in a state where the boundary between public and private disappears. Any behavior or emotion can be recorded, disseminated, and trigger comments, forming continuous public opinion pressure.

More critically, the new media environment is not a communication tool that athletes can choose to opt out of, but an objectively existing networked public space. Even if athletes do not use social media, discussions about them still occur, and pressure is still transmitted. To deeply analyze how this permeable and uncontrollable external networked public space is internalized into athletes' psychological pressure, it is necessary to depart from traditional communication dimensions and introduce the analysis of environmental psychology. The environment is by no means a passive physical background but an active factor that intervenes in individual psychological processes. This implies that the new media environment, as a field with specific stimulus characteristics, generates immediate impact and profound cumulative effects on individual cognition, emotion, and behavior. However, existing research on the impact of new media on athletes mostly starts from social media usage behaviors or individual coping strategies, rarely viewing new media as an independent environment to analyze its stimulus characteristics.

It should be particularly noted that cultural background is a key factor influencing environmental stimuli and individual psychological responses. Collectivist values in Chinese culture, the concept of Face (Mianzi), and high moral expectations for role models make Chinese athletes exceptionally sensitive to public evaluation. When the stimulus characteristics of the new media environment overlap with the core traits of Chinese culture, the psychological challenges faced by athletes may be even more severe.

Based on this, this study proposes a core viewpoint: new media, as a transition at the environmental level, has had a significant impact on athletes' mental health, and this issue requires systematic prioritization. This study views new media as an environmental system with unique stimulus characteristics and elucidates how these characteristics directly affect athletes' mental states within the Chinese cultural context. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide a theoretical basis for protecting athletes' mental health and to emphasize the necessity of environmental-level intervention, which is a crucial component in promoting the civilized development of competitive sports.

2. Three-Dimensional Characteristics of the New Media Environment

The new media environment is not merely a channel for information dissemination but a complex environmental system with unique stimulus characteristics. Based on Gifford's (2014) theoretical perspective on environment-behavior interaction, and integrating Rainie and Wellman's social-temporal view of networked individualism and new media technical characteristics, this study constructs an analytical framework comprising three operable dimensions: physical, social, and temporal. This framework aims to reveal the core mechanisms of environmental influence on individual psychology and further explore the unique role played by the Chinese cultural context in this process (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

2.1 Physical Dimension: High Intensity and Immediate Presence

The physical characteristics of the new media environment are primarily manifested in the high intensity of information stimuli and immediate presence.

High intensity refers to high information density, rapid update speed, and wide dissemination range (Hilbert & López, 2011).

Athletes may face massive amounts of comments and reposts instantly after a competition, with the volume of information far exceeding that of the traditional media era. In particular, influenced by the negativity bias effect, negative information often captures individual attention first, and its processing priority is significantly higher than that of positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001). This means that even if the quantity of positive and negative evaluations is comparable, massive negative information will significantly increase the athletes' cognitive load, forcing them to consume a large amount of psychological resources to filter and defend against information; long-term excessive information overload will lead to decision fatigue and impaired cognitive function (Eppler & Mengis, 2004).

Immediate presence refers to the fact that new media technology has dissolved the barriers of physical space and shortened the psychological distance between communicators and audiences, allowing the real sense of presence of others to be transmitted immediately (Short et al., 1976; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). In this field, any performance, error, or even behavior can be instantly recorded, disseminated, and commented upon. In the traditional media era, athletes' performances needed to go through processes such as media editing, review, and broadcasting, providing a time buffer. However, in the new media era, the audience's mobile phones serve as cameras and dissemination tools, and any moment can become the focus of public opinion. This immediate presence deprives athletes of the space for adjustment and buffering. A single mistake may spread across the entire network within minutes, and athletes may face overwhelming comments while still in the competition. The psychological pressure brought by immediate presence lies in the fact that athletes cannot predict or control the spread of information, and this uncertainty and sense of loss of control will significantly increase anxiety levels (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013).

In the Chinese cultural context, the impact of these physical characteristics is further amplified. China has a massive base of internet users and a high rate of social media usage, which means the volume of information and attention Chinese athletes face may be even more substantial. Collectivist culture causes the public to have strong emotional investment in athletes who represent the national image, making both praise during success and criticism during failure more intense (Hwang, 1987). Furthermore, mechanisms such as "Hot Search" (trending topics) and the mobilization capacity of "Fan Circles" (Fandom) in Chinese internet culture make the aggregation of public opinion faster and more intense. This easily triggers cybercascades, subjecting athletes to more violent information shocks that exceed individual psychological defense thresholds, thereby damaging their mental health (Sunstein, 2017; Lu et al., 2022).

2.2 Social Dimension: Evaluative Nature and Group Polarization

The social characteristics of the new media environment are primarily manifested as social evaluativeness and Group Polarization.

First, social media transforms originally ambiguous social evaluations into visible quantified metrics through mechanisms such as likes, reposts, and comments (Van Dijck, 2013). This mechanism leads to Context Collapse, where distinct audience groups (such as coaches, fans, media, and critics) that were originally segregated by physical settings in real life are compressed into a single interactive context by new media technology (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). For athletes, this means they must simultaneously cope with multiple expectations within a flattened space; they no longer face specific individuals but rather an "Imagined Audience" that is difficult to define accurately and is omnipresent. This structural mixing of audiences, combined with the public visibility of evaluation metrics, forces athletes into a state of permanent scrutiny. Furthermore, this public quantified evaluation inevitably activates the social comparison mechanism (Festinger, 1954). When negative evaluations or superior data of others are made public online, athletes must not only process the informational pressure of the evaluation itself but also endure the cognitive pressure of having the public witness their setbacks. This continuous, insecure, and permanent scrutiny significantly depletes psychological resources, leading athletes to doubt their own abilities and consequently weakening their self-efficacy (Kernis, 2003; Edmondson, 1999).

Second, according to Sunstein's (2017) definition, group polarization refers to the phenomenon where group members, after deliberation, move toward a more extreme point in the direction of their initial tendency. On the internet, driven by a one-sided argument pool and the confidence enhancement brought by peer corroboration, the interaction of like-minded individuals leads opinions not to converge toward the center but to radicalize in a single direction. In the new media

environment, algorithmic recommendation mechanisms tailor information flows for each user, continuously pushing content that matches existing preferences, resulting in objective corrective information being invisibly filtered out and homogenized negative emotions being infinitely amplified (Pariser, 2011). For athletes, this means a single mistake may trigger cybercascades, where netizens abandon independent judgment of facts and instead blindly follow group signals, leading to an explosion of negative evaluations and forming an irrational and aggressive public opinion field (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). In this polarized atmosphere, online anonymity lowers individual morality, transforming extreme negative emotions into aggressive behaviors rarely seen in real life, namely cyberbullying (Suler, 2004). This overwhelming malice not only directly harms athletes' self-esteem but also shakes their sense of self-worth through frequent social comparison and negative evaluation, damaging their mental health (Lin et al., 2025; Mountjoy & Edwards, 2022).

It is worth noting that the destructive power of this high-intensity evaluative and polarized environment constructed by new media is significantly amplified when placed within the context of Chinese culture (Xu & He, 2025). In the context of China's unique Shame Culture and collectivism, individuals are highly sensitive to external evaluations because these concern not only personal dignity but also the harmony of social relationships and the maintenance of Face. Research indicates that these cultural traits cause negative feedback on the internet to be internalized into a more intense fear of negative evaluation, leading individuals to be more prone to a total collapse of self-worth when facing public criticism, rather than viewing it merely as an accusation against a specific behavior (Zhang et al., 2022; Xu & He, 2025).

2.3 Temporal Dimension: Continuity and Inescapability

The characteristics of the new media environment in the temporal dimension are primarily manifested as the continuity and inescapability of pressure.

First, Evans's (2003) environmental stress theory points out that the key characteristic of stress lies in its continuity; that is, environmental stimuli have long-term cumulative effects and do not disappear immediately with the end of the event. This theoretical characteristic has been radically manifested in the new media context, with its technical roots lying in the concept of "Digital Memory" proposed by Mayer-Schönberger (2009). Distinct from the natural forgetting curve of human memory, cyberspace records all information by default, causing every error or instance of negative public opinion involving athletes to be permanently archived, indexed, and retrieved by the internet. This technical feature triggers a long-tail effect of public opinion pressure; that is, past mistakes may be excavated and repeatedly disseminated months or even years later, keeping athletes in a field of scrutiny for a prolonged period. For athletes, this continuity directly deprives them of the recovery space necessary for psychological restoration. According to Attention Restoration Theory, individuals need to periodically detach from environments requiring high directed attention and enter low-stimulus environments to restore cognitive resources (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). However, the continuous operation and around-the-clock push notifications of the new media environment break the boundary between competition and rest, leading to athletes' inability to truly disconnect from stressors (Pacewicz & Mellano, 2024). This sustained external high pressure causes athletes' psychological resources to be chronically depleted without replenishment, thereby inevitably exacerbating job burnout (Zhang & Yu, 2025). Its specific symptoms manifest as emotional exhaustion, sport devaluation (reduced identification with the value of sport), and a significantly reduced sense of accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001; Pacewicz & Mellano, 2024; Raedeke, 1997).

Second, inescapability refers to the fact that the new media environment breaks the isolation of physical space, forming a pervasive and permeable pressure (Ballouli & Sanderson, 2012). Even if athletes actively adopt avoidance strategies, such as uninstalling social media apps, public opinion pressure still permeates their lives through real-world interpersonal networks, transmitting stress (David et al., 2018). This environmental characteristic deprives athletes of their sense of control over information reception. When individuals discover that no matter what actions they take, they cannot block the intrusion of negative information, learned helplessness arises (Seligman, 1975). Relevant research indicates that this perceived uncontrollability of the environment is an inducer of negative emotions; it forces individuals to remain in a defensive state for extended periods, thereby significantly increasing the risk of anxiety and depression (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998).

It is worth noting that this temporal pressure is further amplified within the Chinese cultural context. On the one hand, based on the social structure of the "Differential Mode of Association" (Chaxu Geju) in Chinese society, family members and close

friends are highly involved in interpersonal networks, leading to blurred boundaries between public and private spheres. This makes it difficult for athletes to build defenses against public opinion in their private domains (Fei, 1948/1992). On the other hand, the concept of Shendu (watchfulness over oneself when alone) in traditional Chinese culture emphasizes internal self-restraint. In the new media environment, this cultural concept can evolve into a high-intensity self-surveillance mechanism. Even in moments without supervision, athletes may remain in a state of constant nervous tension due to internalized moral anxiety (Warren & Zurawski, 2014). Furthermore, Chinese society generally holds expectations of moral perfection for public figures, making historical mistakes harder for the public to forgive and forget (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). The persistence of this moral stain often forms a psychological shadow that is difficult to dissipate, thereby further hindering athletes' psychological recovery.

3. Discussion

Based on the perspective of environmental psychology, this study has analyzed the impact of the physical, social, and temporal characteristics of the new media environment on athletes' mental health. Through reasoning across the aforementioned three dimensions, the study finds that new media has evolved from a single medium of information dissemination into a complex environmental system. This system constructs high-intensity stimuli of immediate presence, polarized public evaluation, and persistent permeable pressure, causing negative impacts on individual psychology. On this basis, the discussion will further explore how physical, social, and temporal characteristics interact to form a cyclical pressure field and elucidate the theoretical value of the environmental psychology perspective in analyzing the unique psychological dilemmas of Chinese athletes.

3.1 Synergistic Effects of Multidimensional Characteristics: Constructing a Cyclical Pressure Field

Previous studies have mostly examined the impact of single factors (such as cyberbullying or information overload) in isolation, but this study indicates that the physical, social, and temporal dimensions of the new media environment are functionally interdependent, jointly constructing a cyclical environmental pressure system.

First, the physical dimension provides the structural basis and propagation conditions for the generation of pressure. The high intensity and immediate presence of information dissemination enable massive amounts of information to cover athletes' perceptual range within an extremely short time. This immediate connectivity at the physical level directly serves the operational mechanism of the social dimension by accelerating the information feedback loop. Specifically, algorithms in the social dimension do not merely present information passively but continuously infer user preferences based on click and browsing history, thereby constructing a unique, exclusive information space for each user. Under this personalized filtering mechanism, algorithms prioritize pushing content that confirms users' existing views while filtering out challenging information. Then, the interaction between the high-speed propagation of the physical dimension and the closed filtering of the social dimension leads to the outbreak of "cybercascades" within a short period. For example, when negative evaluations against athletes appear, algorithms quickly capture and reinforce this emotional signal within the closed information environment, facilitating rapid dissemination across the entire network. In other words, without the high-speed propagation channel provided by the physical dimension, those homogenized negative evaluations in the social dimension would be difficult to aggregate into an overwhelming scale effect within an extremely short time.

Second, negative evaluations in the social dimension are transformed into long-term psychological burdens through the temporal dimension. Group polarization pointed out by Sunstein and the online disinhibition effect proposed by Suler jointly constitute the generation mechanism of aggressive content. First, group polarization promotes the radicalization of negative emotions through the argument pool of homogenized groups and peer corroboration effects. Second, relying on anonymity, the online disinhibition effect weakens individual moral constraints and releases aggressive impulses repressed in real life. However, this aggressive content generated by these mechanisms does not dissipate with the end of the event but is retained by the "Digital Memory" characteristic of the temporal dimension. Finally, the default persistent storage and low-cost retrieval functions of cyberspace deprive content of the right to be forgotten, turning social evaluations that might have appeared briefly into a permanently existing, hard-to-remove label.

Therefore, these three dimensions jointly constitute a cyclical pressure system that evolves from generation to enhancement

and finally to solidification. Physical characteristics facilitate the immediate arrival and overload of stressors; social characteristics shape the polarization and aggressiveness of stressors; and temporal characteristics solidify the long-term existence and inescapability of stressors. This systemic environmental characteristic keeps athletes in a psychological state of high cognitive load and low sense of control for extended periods, thereby increasing the risk of impaired mental health.

3.2 Theoretical Value of the Environmental Attribution Perspective

This study introduces Gifford's environmental psychology framework; its core theoretical value lies in supplementing the environmental attribution perspective on athletes' mental health issues (Gifford, 2014). Traditional competitive sports psychology research mostly focuses on attribution at the individual level, paying attention to athletes' resilience, emotion regulation strategies, or personality traits. However, this perspective has limitations when explaining psychological crises in the new media environment. This study finds that the new media environment itself possesses objective attributes that induce psychological problems. Its unique three-dimensional stimulus characteristics pose a severe challenge to athletes' existing psychological adaptation systems, causing systematic excessive consumption of individual cognitive resources and psychological defense mechanisms. Based on this, the introduction of the environmental perspective has significant practical significance. It redefines athletes' psychological crises as objective stress responses of individuals coping with specific environmental pressures, rather than subjective defects in individual capabilities. It emphasizes that in future mental health interventions, equal importance must be attached to the pathogenic impact of environmental factors.

4. Recommendations

The core practical implication of this study is that protecting athletes' mental health must transcend the paradigm of purely individual intervention and shift towards systemic governance at the environmental level. This requires building a comprehensive management system covering platform technology, organizational institutions, and social culture. First, at the level of technological and legal governance, social media platforms should assume primary responsibility by optimizing algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to interrupt the spread of extreme emotions and by establishing efficient mechanisms for monitoring and intervening in cyberbullying. Simultaneously, at the legal level, it is necessary to clarify the consequences of infringement and cyberbullying, using clear clauses to constrain the boundaries of speech and protect athletes' privacy. Second, at the level of organizational support, sports management departments should establish a proactive psychological support system. This system should not only provide professional public opinion management and legal aid but also guarantee athletes' rest time within the competitive environment, ensuring that athletes have sufficient safe time for the restoration of psychological resources. Finally, at the cultural level, public opinion urgently needs to reflect on the excessive expectations of moral perfection for athletes. By cultivating a rational, inclusive, and humanistic sports culture, the professional environment for athletes can be improved at its root.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study constructs a theoretical model of the impact of new media on athletes' mental health from the perspective of environmental psychology, certain limitations remain. This study is primarily based on literature review and theoretical deduction, lacking support from empirical data. Additionally, it focuses on analyzing the pathogenic characteristics of the environment, with insufficient exploration of individual psychological resilience during the coping process and the potential social support functions of new media. Future research can develop in the following directions. First, conduct longitudinal studies to quantify the dynamic relationship between the duration of new media usage, the intensity of public opinion, and athletes' mental health status. Second, deepen cross-cultural comparative research to contrast the differences in psychological reactions to cyberbullying between athletes in collectivist and individualist cultural backgrounds, further clarifying whether the concept of Face plays a specific effect in the process of stress transmission.

6. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of environmental psychology, this study analyzes the mechanisms through which the new media environment influences athletes' mental health. The study finds that new media has evolved into a complex environmental system, jointly constructing a closed-loop space of cyclical pressure targeting athletes across three dimensions: physical,

social, and temporal. Specifically, the high intensity and immediate presence of the physical dimension provide the foundation for pressure propagation, significantly increasing cognitive load (Hilbert & López, 2011). The generalized evaluation and group polarization of the social dimension create an aggressive field of public opinion, destabilizing athletes' sense of self-worth (Sunstein, 2017). Furthermore, the Digital Memory and inescapability of the temporal dimension transform instantaneous shocks of public opinion into lasting psychological exhaustion (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). It is worth noting that within the unique cultural background of China, collectivist values and Shame Culture further amplify the negative impacts of the aforementioned environmental characteristics, facilitating a trend where social evaluation fear becomes internalized into the individual's deep psychological structure (Xu & He, 2025).

The core contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing new media as an independent environmental system and constructing a theoretical framework linking environmental characteristics to psychological outcomes. The study emphasizes that protecting athletes' mental health requires not only enhancing individual psychological resilience but, more importantly, implementing normative constraints at the environmental level. Through multi-level interventions such as platform management, legal protection, and cultural guidance, negative environmental stimuli can be mitigated to create a safe environment.

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