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Branding the Nation through Beijing 2022:
A Semiotic Analysis of Olympic
Sponsorship, National Identity, and Gender
Ideologies in Chinese Advertising Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates how Olympic sponsorships in China serve not only commercial but also ideological functions by constructing national identity and gender ideologies through advertising. While existing literature has extensively addressed the commercial value of sponsorships, there is limited research on how such campaigns symbolically produce meaning, especially in non-Western contexts. Focusing on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, this research examines how Chinese consumers interpret Olympic sponsorship advertisements through culturally embedded signs, and how these campaigns construct meanings related to nationalism and gender. Olympic advertising is therefore positioned as a cultural text that can reinforce or challenge dominant ideological narratives.

With a social constructivist paradigm, this qualitative case study combines semiotic textual analysis with focus group interviews. Specifically, the study first conducts a semiotic analysis of two Olympic-themed advertisement videos by Chinese dairy brands Yili and Mengniu. Then, a semiotic analysis was applied to interpret data from focus group discussions, where participants reflected on Beijing 2022, Olympic sponsorship, and related advertising content.

The findings reveal how Olympic sponsorships in China operate as ideological sites. Consumers interpret advertisements through nationalistic and gendered lenses, often reinforcing collective identity or questioning representational norms. Olympic advertising tends to embed official national and cultural symbols to foster patriotic sentiment. Visual narratives commonly include national flags, traditional aesthetics, and iconic athletes, reinforcing a shared imaginary of unity and pride. Participants frequently used pronouns such as “we” and “our”, demonstrating an internalised sense of national belonging. Gender representations in media and ads also followed normative ideals: women were typically associated with beauty and were infantilized, while men symbolised strength and performance. These portrayals were largely accepted but occasionally contested, reflecting tensions between patriarchal norms and emerging feminist perspectives. Media and ads related to Olympic sponsorship emerges as a space where gender and national ideas are both shaped and questioned.

This research contributes to sports marketing, semiotics, and cultural studies by offering an integrated framework for analysing brand communication in ideological contexts.

It also highlights the active role of audiences in constructing and negotiating media meaning. Ultimately, the study provides insight into how Olympic sponsorship operates as both corporate branding and socio-political messaging in contemporary China.

Keywords: Olympic Sponsorship, Semiotic Analysis, National Identity, Gender Ideology, Chinese culture

Lay of Summary

This study looks at how Olympic sponsorship in China goes beyond just selling products but also plays a role in shaping how people think about national identity and gender ideologies. While most previous research on sponsorship focuses on business and branding, this study explores how companies use Olympic-themed media and advertising to send cultural and political messages, especially in a Chinese context.

Focusing on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the research examines how everyday viewers understand and react to media materials and advertisements related to the Games. It studies two Olympic ads from major Chinese dairy brands, Yili and Mengniu, and also gathers insights for these ads and broader Olympic media materials from focus group interviews with Chinese audiences. By looking at the visuals, symbols, and stories used in these ads and broader Olympic media materials —like national flags, traditional imagery, and famous athletes—the study explores how ideas of patriotism and mainstream gender identities are built into media and advertising.

The findings show that these media and ads aren't just about promoting brands but also reflect and meanwhile help shape social values and ideologies in mainland China. Viewers often feel and show a strong sense of national pride, using words like “we” and “our” when talking about the country. In addition, the media and ads related to Olympics tend to present men as strong and high-performing, while women are often shown as beautiful and infantilized. While some interviewees accepted these traditional female images as natural, others, especially younger or female participants, challenged them, calling for more diverse and realistic portrayals of women. Olympic sponsorship emerges as a space where gender and national ideas are both shaped and questioned.

This research helps us understand how media and advertising related to and during big global events like the Olympics can reflect and influence what people believe about their country and about themselves.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the Context

Olympic sponsorship in China is considered more than a marketing activity but a symbolic expression of national identity, ideology, and cultural transformation. In the background of China's rapid economic development and global integration, the Olympic Games have served not only as a celebration of athletic excellence but also as a platform for projecting national power and reshaping global perception. The Beijing 2008 and 2022 Olympics were particularly significant in reinforcing China's aspirations for global legitimacy, soft power, and cultural modernity (Fan & Lu, 2020).

Since the Reform and Opening-Up in 1978, China's sports industry has experienced significant transformation, shifting from a state-controlled instrument of physical culture to a commercialised and increasingly globalised industry. Throughout this period of transition, sport in China has been redefined. It is now regarded not only as a public good, but also as a source of commercial value (Zhan, 2016; Liu et al., 2017; Ren & Dai, 2020). In this policy and background, commercial entities in China have increasingly participated in Olympic movement. Their involvement extends beyond the pursuit of market-based objectives. It also reflects efforts to express patriotism and enhance cultural legitimacy. As a result, Olympic sponsorship has become a significant platform for the production of ideology. Through corporate campaigns and advertising, such sponsorship conveys national narratives. These include themes of collective progress, national unity, and cultural revitalisation.

Yili and Mengniu, China's two leading dairy brands, provide a particularly revealing case study. As long-standing rivals in China's rapidly expanding dairy market, both brands competed for symbolic capital by sponsoring the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Historically, dairy consumption in China was limited and culturally marginal—associated with Western habits and often viewed with suspicion. However, beginning in the early 2000s, the Chinese government and aligned commercial entities began repositioning milk as a product symbolising health, strength, and national development (Smart, 2018). Through state health narratives and media campaigns, milk became a metaphor for national rejuvenation and individual vitality.

This symbolic repositioning was strongly reflected in the two advertising campaigns produced by Yili and Mengniu during Beijing 2022. Their Olympic advertisements were rich in national imagery, red colour symbolism, emotional storytelling, and portrayals of strength,

harmony, and collective pride. These ads do more than sell products—they represent and reinforce dominant values through a constellation of visual and linguistic signs.

One part of this research therefore focuses on a semiotic analysis of the two official video advertisements released by Yili and Mengniu during the 2022 Winter Olympics. Advertising serves as a key medium where commercial and ideological messages are intertwined. The goal of the advertising analysis is to unpack how symbolic elements in the advertisements construct meaning related to national identity and gender and reflect or reinforce related ideologies.

The second part of this research examines audience interpretation through focus group interviews with Chinese viewers who are also consumers of Olympic sponsorship messages. The interviews used a semi-structured approach, allowing discussions to move beyond the Yili and Mengniu ads to explore broader themes such as the Beijing 2022 Games, Olympic media representations, commercial sponsorship, and audience attitudes towards advertising. This approach enables the study to capture both textual meaning and reception practices, offering a fuller picture of how Olympic sponsorship functions as both a commercial and ideological activity.

In this way, the study situates Olympic sponsorship within a wider cultural and political context, exploring how branding in China serves not just economic but also symbolic and ideological purposes. By combining advertising textual and audience analysis, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of how national identity and cultural values are communicated, consumed, and contested in the contemporary Chinese media landscape.

1.2 Research Problem and Rationale

While sports marketing and Olympic sponsorship have received considerable scholarly attention, the majority of research tends to focus on measurable commercial outcomes—such as brand visibility, return on investment, and consumer engagement. However, this research argues that in the Chinese context, Olympic sponsorship functions not merely as a commercial activity, but as an ideological discourse embedded with symbolic meanings. Sponsorship campaigns often do more than promote products; they circulate messages that mediate collective identity, cultural heritage, and national pride. Particularly in

China, where commercial media, state ideology, and nationalism are deeply intertwined, Olympic sponsorship becomes a privileged site of ideological negotiation.

Despite the growing body of literature on Olympic marketing, two significant gaps remain. Firstly, most existing studies originate from Western contexts and are rooted in functionalist marketing paradigms. These frameworks frequently rely on sender–receiver models that underplay the role of audience interpretation and ignore how meaning is culturally constructed and contested (Chandler, 2022). Secondly, limited attention has been given to how Chinese audiences—as both spectators of the Olympic Games and consumers of corporate messaging—actively engage with and interpret the symbolic content of sponsorship campaigns. Few studies incorporate audience voices or explore how consumers decode, negotiate, or resist ideological messages embedded in Olympic advertisements.

This study addresses these gaps by treating both the advertising content and consumer interpretations as discursive texts. It analyses how national identity and gender ideologies are constructed through corporate communication, while also examining how these messages are received, endorsed, or challenged by Chinese viewers. Importantly, the study employs a dual-methodological design:

(1) A semiotic analysis of two official video advertisements from Yili and Mengniu during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and

(2) Semi-structured focus group interviews with Chinese consumers, exploring their views not only on these ads but also on broader Olympic themes including media representation, branding, and nationalism.

This focus on audience interpretation is a key innovation of the research. Drawing from Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Barthes' (1977) myth theory, the study conceptualises viewer discourse as a semiotic practice—where meanings are not simply received but actively constructed and potentially contested. As highlighted by scholars such as Lee (2015) and Keane (2018), semiotic ideology is embedded in everyday media engagement, making audience reception central to any comprehensive semiotic analysis.

By integrating semiotics with audience research, this study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary work that positions branding as a cultural and ideological process. It also offers an important non-Western perspective by foregrounding the specificities of the Chinese media environment, where state narratives, market forces, and consumer agency

intersect in complex ways. Ultimately, the research seeks to shed light on how Olympic sponsorship functions not just as a tool of corporate communication but as a contested cultural site where meaning, identity, and ideology are continuously negotiated.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

This research aims to explore how Olympic sponsorship operates as both a commercial and ideological medium in contemporary China, with particular attention to how national identity and gender ideologies are constructed in advertising and interpreted by audiences. Grounded in semiotic and cultural theory, the study seeks to uncover the symbolic strategies used by Olympic sponsors and the ways in which Chinese consumers engage with and respond to these messages.

The study takes as its central focus the sponsorship campaigns of Yili and Mengniu during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. These two brands not only dominate China's dairy market but also act as powerful communicators of state-sanctioned values through their corporate messaging. By combining textual and audience-based methods, the research situates itself at the intersection of branding, media studies, and ideology critique.

Specifically, the research has two main objectives:

To analyse the semiotic construction of national identity and gender ideologies in two video advertisements produced by Yili and Mengniu during Beijing 2022.

To investigate how Chinese audiences interpret these symbolic messages, particularly within the broader context of Olympic media, national discourse, and brand communication.

These aims give rise to the following research questions:

(1) How are national identity and gender ideologies constructed through Olympic sponsorship advertisements in China?

- What signs and symbols are used to communicate ideological meanings?
- How are themes of nationhood, pride, strength, or gender difference visually and linguistically encoded?

(2) How do Chinese audiences interpret and respond to these ideological messages?

– What dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings emerge in focus group discussions?

– How do audiences connect the advertisements to wider social discourses about China, modernity, or gender roles?

By addressing these questions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how commercial media in China not only reflects but also participates in the production of cultural meaning, collective identity, and ideological discourse.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates semiotics, ideology theory, audience reception theory, and cultural studies. These traditions collectively provide the analytical tools to explore how Olympic sponsorship advertising in China constructs symbolic meaning and how audiences interpret such texts in culturally specific ways.

At the core of the study lies semiotic theory, which offers a systematic approach to analysing how signs produce meaning. Following the foundational models of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, the research treats advertising as a signifying system composed of visual, textual, and audio elements that work together to create associations (Saussure, 1916; Peirce, 1931–58). Roland Barthes' (1972) concept of myth is particularly relevant here, as it helps explain how everyday media representations naturalise dominant ideologies under the guise of “common sense”. Through myth, advertising not only sells products but embeds nationalistic, gendered, and moral narratives into seemingly neutral visual codes. In the context of Olympic media and ads, semiotics is used to decode and analyse how signs such as national flags, and athletes operate symbolically to evoke national pride, unity, discipline, or virtue. These signs are neither arbitrary nor innocent, but they are deeply embedded in cultural histories and state narratives that shape their interpretation.

In this study, semiotics offers a coherent method to trace how meaning is encoded in symbolic forms and how those meanings are socially and culturally organised. Unlike purely discursive or rhetorical approaches, semiotics enables both micro-level textual analysis of media and people's everyday conversations and macro-level ideological interpretation behind those discourses. It provides a flexible yet rigorous toolkit for analysing the interplay between

visual culture, national ideology, and audience meaning-making in Olympic sponsorship campaigns. Particularly, its compatibility with feminist theory, nationalism studies, and reception theory makes it an ideal anchor for this interdisciplinary study.

To analyse the ideological work of Olympic sponsorship, this study focuses on cultural theories of nationalism, especially Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities and Michael Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism. These perspectives suggest that nationhood is not simply a political reality, but a symbolic and emotional construction sustained through everyday cultural practices, including media and advertising. Olympic advertisements, in this way, do not just reflect but also help produce and normalise nationalism. Through visual tropes like showing flags or collective celebrations, commercial brands can participate in reproducing the national imaginary.

In addition, this study also engages with feminist media theory, particularly the analysis of gender representation in visual culture. Influenced by Erving Goffman's (1979) work on gendered display and Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze, this research considers how advertising frames women and men differently in terms of agency, emotion, and physicality. Chinese Olympic advertising often positions female athletes in roles of grace, beauty, or care, while male athletes are shown as strong, stoic, or victorious. These representations draw from—and reinforce—existing patriarchal codes within Chinese media culture. However, as Rosalind Gill (2007) notes, postfeminist media also invites contradictory readings, combining empowerment narratives with conventional femininity. This study explores how such hybrid gender ideologies are encoded in advertisements and decoded by audiences.

A key innovation in this research lies in treating audience discourse as a valid site of semiotic meaning-making. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the study rejects the idea of audiences as passive recipients. Instead, it sees viewers as active interpreters who may accept, negotiate, or resist the ideological messages embedded in advertising texts. In this framework, focus group interviews are not merely sources of opinion—they are texts in themselves. The language, metaphors, and framing used by participants reveal how dominant codes are reproduced or challenged in everyday discourse. This approach aligns with cultural studies methodologies, which privilege lived experience and interpretive variability over fixed or universal meanings.

1.5 Methodological Overview

The paradigm of this study is social constructivist. This paradigm views meaning as culturally and socially produced through interaction, language, and discourse. Rather than assuming a fixed or objective reality, the research acknowledges the multiplicity of interpretations that emerge when individuals engage with symbolic texts such as advertising. This epistemological stance supports the study's aim to explore how ideological meanings are encoded by sponsors and decoded by audiences.

To investigate how Olympic sponsorship operates as a site of ideological construction and reception, the study adopts a qualitative case study design. Case studies are particularly suited for examining complex cultural phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics provides a timely and context-rich case through which to explore both the representational strategies of brands and the interpretive practices of Chinese audiences.

The research employs a dual-method strategy:

Semiotic textual analysis is used to examine two official video advertisements produced by Yili and Mengniu during the Beijing 2022 Games. This method enables close reading of visual and linguistic elements, uncovering how signs construct meanings related to nationhood, gender, and cultural values.

Focus group interviews with Chinese consumers are conducted to explore audience interpretations of Olympic advertising and broader Olympic media discourse. A semi-structured interview format allows participants to reflect on both specific sponsorship content and their wider perceptions of Beijing 2022, branding, and national narratives. These discussions are not only treated as opinion-sharing but also as discursive data that reveal how audiences actively construct, negotiate, or resist dominant meanings. In this study, focus group transcripts are also subject to semiotic-informed discourse analysis, as participants' language is understood not merely as personal opinion but as a cultural text—rich with symbolic codes, rhetorical patterns, and ideological framing.

This methodological design is justified by its capacity to support a multi-layered reading of symbolic communication. The semiotic analysis reveals how ideological meanings are embedded in media texts, while the audience data expose how such meanings are interpreted and re-articulated within everyday cultural and social frames. Together, these

methods allow the study to examine both the encoding and decoding of symbolic content, offering a richer and more dynamic understanding of how Olympic sponsorship operates as a site of cultural production.

1.6 Contribution and Significance

This thesis makes several important contributions to the fields of sports marketing, semiotics, media and cultural studies, and Chinese communication research. By examining Olympic sponsorship in China as a site of ideological meaning-making, the study moves beyond functionalist accounts of advertising effectiveness and instead positions branding as a cultural and discursive practice. This thesis contributes to a more critical understanding of how Olympic sponsorship acts as a vehicle for ideological communication, shaped not only by corporate strategy but also by public interpretation, cultural memory, and national sentiment.

(1) Theoretical Contribution

The study extends semiotic theory by applying it in a non-Western, ideologically complex context—namely, Chinese Olympic advertising. While semiotics has been extensively used in Western consumer cultures, its application to state-influenced sponsorship campaigns in China is still limited. This research builds an integrated theoretical framework, drawing from semiotics, nationalism theory, feminist media theory, and audience reception models, to analyse how meaning is constructed and contested in brand communication. It demonstrates how corporate messaging functions not only to promote products but also to reinforce or challenge narratives of nationhood, gender, and cultural identity.

(2) Empirical Contribution

Empirically, the study contributes original data on both brand strategy and audience interpretation during a significant global event—Beijing 2022. Through detailed semiotic readings of two video advertisements by Yili and Mengniu, the thesis uncovers how symbolic imagery, language, and narrative structure work ideologically. More innovatively, it presents focus group discussions as a source of semiotic discourse, revealing how Chinese consumers read, resist, or reconfigure these meanings. The inclusion of audience voices offers rare insight into how ideological media content is interpreted in everyday cultural life.

(3) Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this research offers a model for combining semiotic analysis with qualitative audience research. It demonstrates how a dual-method approach allows for a multi-layered exploration of symbolic meaning from production to reception. It thereby enriches semiotic scholarship with audience-centred perspectives. Viewing both media texts and audience interpretations as cultural texts allows researchers to better connect the study of discourse and semiotic analysis in media and consumer studies.

(4) Contextual Significance

In China's rapidly evolving media and political landscape, this study provides timely insight into the relationship between state narratives, commercial branding, and national identity construction. It challenges simplistic East–West dichotomies in advertising theory and offers a nuanced account of how ideology operates within consumer culture in a non-Western context.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into three main parts comprising eight chapters in total. The structure follows a logical progression from conceptual grounding to methodological development, followed by empirical analysis and final reflection.

Chapter 1 – Introduction establishes the background and significance of the study, outlines the research problem, objectives, and theoretical framework, and justifies the methodological choices. It introduces the interdisciplinary perspective adopted in the thesis and situates the research within the broader context of Chinese Olympic sponsorship and media culture.

Chapters 2 to 5 constitute the literature review:

Chapter 2 explores the evolution of sports marketing and the commercialisation of the Olympic Games, focusing on the global development of sponsorship models.

Chapter 3 examines the unique characteristics of Olympic marketing in China, particularly the hybrid configuration of state-led ideology and corporate branding.

Chapter 4 introduces key theoretical foundations in semiotics, tracing classical and contemporary models that underpin the analysis of signs and symbolic meaning.

Chapter 5 reviews the application of semiotic approaches in sports communication and advertising, highlighting existing gaps in research on audience reception and ideological readings in non-Western contexts.

Chapter 6 – Methodology outlines the research paradigm, methodological framework, and dual-method design combining semiotic textual analysis and focus group interviews. It explains the case selection, sampling, data collection procedures, and strategies for ensuring credibility and reflexivity.

Chapters 7 to 10 present the empirical core of the thesis, encompassing both textual and audience-based analyses of Olympic sponsorship and its ideological functions.

Chapter 7 provides a semiotic analysis of Yili's Olympic-themed advertisement. It explores how themes of nationalism, gender, and collectivism are encoded through symbolic visuals and narratives, with a particular focus on how corporate branding aligns with state-sanctioned cultural codes.

Chapter 8 offers a parallel semiotic reading of Mengniu's Olympic advertisement, emphasising the symbolic construction of heroic femininity, moral virtue, and national identity through traditional cultural references, including the animation of the athlete Eileen Gu as Mulan.

Chapter 9 shifts the analytical lens from media texts to audience reception. It presents a semiotic-informed discourse analysis of focus group interviews centred on the theme of nationalism. Drawing on participants' language, metaphors, and interpretive framings, the chapter investigates how audiences construct collective identity and national pride in relation to Olympic media, branding, and sponsorship.

Chapter 10 continues the audience-based analysis by focusing on the theme of gender ideologies. It examines how participants responded to the representation of masculinity and femininity in Olympic advertising, highlighting moments of both acceptance and resistance. The chapter considers how emerging feminist sensibilities coexist with enduring patriarchal norms in participants' interpretive discourse.

Together, these four chapters form a multi-perspectival analysis of both the encoding and decoding processes of symbolic communication, illustrating how Olympic sponsorship in China operates as a discursive field in which meanings of nationhood, gender, and identity are constructed, circulated, and negotiated.

2. Sport Marketing and Olympic Sponsorship

2.1 Introduction

The commercialisation of sport has turned it into more than just an arena for entertainment and competition but also for cultural production and ideological communication. As the Olympic Games have developed into a major global event, the ways in which sport is marketed and sponsored have also changed significantly. These practices now go beyond simple business deals. Instead, they focus more on symbolic meaning and on shaping identity through branding and communication strategies.

This chapter reviews the relevant literature on sport marketing, symbolic consumption, sponsorship theory, Olympic commercialisation, and Olympic sponsorship, in order to establish the theoretical foundation for this study. The first section reviews the evolution of sport marketing from a functional tool to an emotionally and culturally resonant practice. Then the next section reviews symbolic consumption theory, highlighting how sport products and brands serve as vehicles for identity expression and social meaning. The chapter subsequently examines the development and structure of sports sponsorship, emphasising the critical role of sponsor–property fit and the symbolic dynamics of brand association. Finally, the chapter focuses on Olympic sponsorship as a unique site where commercial and ideological agendas intersect. It analyses how Olympic branding strategies harness symbolic capital, contributing to narratives of national pride, cultural identity, and social values. Through this review, the chapter identifies existing gaps in the literature, particularly concerning non-Western sponsorship contexts and the ideological functions of sport branding—gaps that this research aims to address in the Chinese setting.

2.2 Sport Marketing

2.2.1 Theoretical Foundations in Sport Marketing

Sport can be seen as a broad category of activities, experiences, and commercial enterprises centred on athletics, health, wellness, recreation, and leisure (Schwarz & Hunter, 2017). As Lagae (2005) notes, sport meets essential human needs—health, enjoyment, achievement, and social interaction. Definitions of sport marketing have evolved over time. Based on Mullin et al. (1993, p.6), sport marketing refers to "all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sport consumers through exchange processes". This study adopts this

definition, as its focus on consumer needs and exchange processes is also reflected in the works of Cristóbal Fransi (2003), Thrassou et al. (2012), and Liu (2017), as cited by Rosales and Tito (2022). Accordingly, this research defines sport marketing as a strategic exchange process through which sport products and services are developed, priced, promoted, and delivered to satisfy consumers—whether individuals or organisations.

Academic interest in sport marketing began in the 1970s. Parkhouse and Ulrich (1979) positioned sport marketing as a tool for increasing revenue and media visibility for organisations and athletes (Manoli, 2018). As a subdivision of marketing, sport marketing also follows the traditional four P's of the marketing mix representing product, price, promotion, and place, which first emerged in the late 1940s and was firstly put forward by marketer E. Jerome McCarthy, to be used as set of marketing tools to pursue the marketing objectives in the target market (Beech & Chadwick, 2007). However, in 1983, Meenaghan widened the marketing communications mix by arguing that commercial sponsorship can be considered as one of its elements. Also in 1983, Mullin's article emphasized fan interest, sport participation and consumption of products through sport (Girginov & Parry, 2005). Sport marketing has evolved significantly since the late 1970s, developing from a basic commercial tool into a distinct and rapidly growing discipline (Manoli, 2018). Recent research has focused on key areas such as branding (Hohenberger & Grohs, 2020), corporate social responsibility (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Plewa & Quester, 2011), and fan engagement (Devlin & Billings, 2018; Silva & Veríssimo, 2020).

2.2.2 Symbolic Consumption in Sport Marketing

With the growing recognition of sport as a cultural product, sport marketing has evolved from a transactional framework to one that embraces emotional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions. As Holt (2005) observes, consumption is increasingly embedded in lifestyle, identity, and symbolic meaning. This development mirrors the broader shift in marketing research towards understanding how brands contribute to meaning-making and cultural narratives, particularly within leisure industries such as sport. Building on this shift, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the symbolic and experiential dimensions of sport consumption.

The concept of symbolic consumption was first articulated in consumer research by scholars such as Solomon (1983, 1987) and Belk (1988), who argue that individuals use products not solely for their functional utility but as communicative devices to express

personal and social identity. Through this lens, consumption is a form of non-verbal communication in which goods acquire meaning through their capacity to reflect values, signal group affiliation, and construct the self. Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self further underscores how possessions can come to represent integral aspects of one's identity. These foundational insights have since informed a range of studies on identity construction and symbolic interaction within consumer culture.

The sport is characterised by its intangible, emotional, and ritualistic nature and thereby some forms of sport consumption can become symbolic consumption. As Schwarz and Hunter (2017) note, sport services are ephemeral, because they disappear once the event concludes, leaving behind only memories, emotions, and symbolic associations. Experiential marketing strategies amplify this effect by immersing fans in emotionally charged narratives (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). Unlike utilitarian products, sport consumption often centres on the affective bonds it fosters through chants, colours, rituals, and shared affiliations, which collectively construct a symbolic language of belonging. Dimanche and Samdahl (1994) similarly argue that leisure behaviours function as symbolic expressions of social values, making sport an ideal domain for identity performance.

A growing body of research has examined how symbolic consumption in sport contributes to brand loyalty, particularly through the mechanism of self-image congruence. Consumers are more likely to align with brands that reflect their actual or aspirational identities (Sirgy & Su, 2000). In the sport domain, this connection is particularly salient, as fans often perceive teams as extensions of themselves. For example, Hee Kwak and Kang (2009) found that fans who experienced strong congruence between their self-concept and a team's symbolic image demonstrated greater intention to purchase team merchandise. Guzmán Rincón et al. (2023) further demonstrate that symbolic value is a key predictor of brand loyalty among football fans, highlighting how team affiliation serves as a site of personal and collective meaning-making.

Based on this perspective, Solomon and Assael (1987) introduced a gestalt approach to symbolic consumption, arguing that individuals do not consume products in isolation, but as part of broader product constellations. These constellations, functionally unrelated but symbolically coherent, enable consumers to perform socially recognisable roles. For example, particular combinations of attire, technology, or brand choices may collectively signify 'the successful entrepreneur' or 'the loyal fan'. In the context of sport marketing, this

insight offers a valuable lens for interpreting how sponsorships operate symbolically: brands do not simply appear alongside sport, but actively embed themselves within constellations of meaning that evoke national pride, cultural authenticity, or gendered ideals. This approach is particularly relevant to Olympic sponsorship in this study, where brands such as Yili and Mengniu draw upon a constellation of cultural symbols—including athletes, flags, familial values, and traditional colours—to align with dominant ideological narratives.

These perspectives reinforce the central insight that social meaning often supersedes functional utility in sport consumption. As Witt (2010) contends, symbolic attributes—not practical benefits—are the primary drivers of consumer engagement in such contexts. For sport marketers, this means recognising that fans do not merely purchase tickets or jerseys—they invest in values, identities, and imagined communities. Understanding this symbolic dimension is therefore essential to comprehending how sport brands cultivate loyalty, meaning, and cultural resonance.

2.2.3 Sport Marketing in the Digital Age

Digitisation has transformed sport marketing into a continuous, interactive, and participatory process. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok offer real-time spaces for fans to engage with teams and sponsors, co-create narratives, and build symbolic meaning (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Live, embedded communication has replaced traditional advertising, especially in fast-paced sport environments where fans crave immediacy (Cornwell, 2020). The rise of digital engagement has also enabled new sponsorship formats, where value is created not just through visibility but through emotional resonance and social alignment (Popp & Woratschek, 2017).

Moreover, social media is now a key tool for building cultural fit and authenticity, thereby driving fan retention (Pronschinske et al., 2012). Sport marketing has evolved from a transactional practice into a rich, interdisciplinary field combining symbolic theory, cultural studies, and digital strategy. Understanding this shift from 4Ps to symbolic co-creation enables a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind Olympic sponsorship and fan loyalty. As sport continues to serve as a global cultural spectacle, marketing strategies must move beyond visibility to meaning. In this symbolic economy, brands compete not only for attention but for identity, loyalty, and emotion.

2.3 Sports sponsorship

2.3.1 Definitions and Evolution of Sponsorship

Sponsorship marketing became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has since vastly evolved as a form of indirect marketing (Cornwell, 2020). Sponsorship-linked marketing is defined as “the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for the purpose of building and communicating an association to a sponsorship” (Cornwell, 1995, p.15). Meenaghan (1983, p. 9, cited by Desbordes & Richelieu, 2012, p.48) defined sponsorship as the financial or in-kind assistance to an activity offered by a commercial organization with the aim of achieving commercial objectives. Based on Meenaghan (1991), through sponsoring an activity, the sponsor attempts to obtain the exposure potential which the activity has in terms of audience, and the image associated with that activity in terms of how it is perceived. In this study, the focus is on sports sponsorship, particularly sponsorship of sports mega-events, such as the Olympic Games.

These years, sports sponsorship has become one of the most used marketing strategies or a marketing communication tool for organizations, and an extra-sports area of business (Van Heerden, 2001; O'Reilly & Harrison, 2005; Bee & Kahle, 2006; Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2019). In the practice field, the first sport sponsorship can date back to 776 BC when prominent Greek citizens and local governments financially supported the organization of the first celebration of the “Olympic Games” (Schwarz & Hunter, 2017). In the academic research, the definition of sports sponsorship was first proposed by Abratt and Grobler in 1989, and developed by Hermanns (1989), Maldonado-Erazo et al. (2019) and Cornwell (2020) as a mutually beneficial bidirectional transaction in form of a trade agreement between a sponsor and a sponsee whereby the latter receives a fee (or value) and the former obtains the right to associate itself with the activity sponsored. There is a clear movement of sport sponsorship from a philanthropic approach to a marketing tool (Desbordes & Richelieu, 2012).

2.3.2 The Role and Impact of Sponsor–Property Fit

‘Property’ or ‘sponsees’ is the recipient of the sport sponsorship, presenting the event, activity, organization or person being sponsored (Smith et al., 2024; Cornwell, 2020). It is

important to mention that property in sports sponsorship basically includes two different forms, first, sport events or activities and, second, teams and sportspeople (Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2019). ‘Sponsor’ generally refers to the organisation providing financial or in-kind assistance to a sport property in sponsorship agreement (Maldonado-Erazo et al., 2019). The sponsor investing in a particular sport property could obtain benefits such as promotional rights and the marketing advantages associated with that sport property, so that the sponsorship can achieve its aim of developing the sponsor’s brand image and customer loyalty through the transfer of consumers’ positive perceptions from the sponsored property (Schwarz & Hunter, 2017; Hino & Takeda, 2020; Smith et al., 2024).

An essential concept within sponsorship theories is the sponsor–property fit, referring to the perceived alignment between the sponsor’s image and the characteristics of the sponsee. A high level of perceived fit can positively influence brand awareness, image transfer, and consumer attitudes (Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Conversely, a weak fit may lead to confusion about the brand’s meaning, triggering cognitive resistance and lowering the effectiveness of the sponsorship message. According to Smith (2004), consumers evaluate this relationship based on both fit and quality, with better fit leading to higher recall, recognition, and more favourable responses. For example, sportswear brands sponsoring the Olympic Games is often seen as a strong fit due to the close alignment between the product and the nature of the sports.

Several factors contribute to perceived fit. Smith (2004) outlines six dimensions: product attributes, user imagery, brand personality, functional benefits, experiential benefits, and symbolic benefits. Each of these relates to the degree to which the sponsor and the sponsee share common usage, values, emotions, or prestige. For instance, Rolex’s sponsorship of the St. Tropez Cup exemplifies symbolic fit through shared associations with exclusivity and status. Similarly, Flora’s partnership with the London Marathon highlights shared health-related benefits. According to Olson and Thjømmøe (2011), other relevant predictors of fit include product relevance, attitudinal similarity, geographic or audience overlap, and sponsorship duration. The stronger the alignment across these dimensions, the greater the potential for successful brand association and message transfer.

Duration and frequency also play crucial roles in the effectiveness of sponsorship. Based on Cornwell’s (2020) analysis, even when consumers are not actively paying attention, repeated exposure to sponsorships can shape preferences through implicit memory. This is

known as the mere exposure effect—a psychological principle suggesting that familiarity can breed liking. Therefore, long-term sponsorships may yield stronger brand associations than one-off engagements. Moreover, embedding the brand in the emotional highs and lows of sport enables it to ride the wave of audience sentiment, enhancing memory and identification over time.

2.3.3 Ethical Controversies in Sport Sponsorship

However, sport sponsorship is not without controversy. Some products—such as tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy food—are viewed as ethically problematic when associated with sport. Being sponsored by tobacco, alcohol, and gambling is banned in many countries primarily because these products might reach youth audiences or children through sponsorship, even though they are not intended to reach (Cornwell, 2020). The impact of sport sponsorship by alcohol companies has been identified as a priority research concern (World Health Organization, 2014). Focusing upon the controversial alcohol-sport sponsorship pairing, Kelly et al. (2016) examined how the choice and behaviour of one sponsorship partner affects consumer attitude toward the other partner, taking differing sponsoring brands (liquor vs. beer) and sponsored teams (cricket vs. rugby league) as cases. In addition, unhealthy food and drink are also criticized when they are in a sponsorship relationship, since they might lead to illness such as obesity. Such sponsorships, while commercially effective, have also sparked public concerns, particularly when misaligned with sporting values, as later seen in cases like London 2012's junk food and drink sponsors such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Cadbury. Due to children, the elderly, minorities, and the poor may be more vulnerable and need protection, and are more likely to be persuaded, they are considered as vulnerable in many situations (Cornwell, 2020). Among vulnerable groups, children receive the most attention in terms of sponsorship. Marketing directly to children seems more acceptable to parents if the product is, for example, sporting goods or healthy foods, but unacceptable if it is alcohol or fast food (Cornwell, 2020).

2.3.4 Symbolic and Strategic Value of Sport Sponsorship

Despite such concerns, sport sponsorship remains a core component of the marketing communication mix. Meenaghan (1991) argues that sponsorship, like advertising, public relations, and sales promotion, serves as a platform for brand communication. However,

unlike traditional advertising, which often interrupts content, sponsorship enables brand integration into the audience experience. As Egan (2014) notes, this embedded communication enhances emotional engagement, as fans are more receptive to messages presented during meaningful moments—such as a favourite athlete winning or a national team competing.

Moreover, sport sponsorship has proven effective in generating brand loyalty and community attachment. When done well, it builds symbolic associations between the brand and values such as teamwork, perseverance, or national pride. For global events like the Olympics, this symbolic layer becomes even more significant. According to Cornwell (2020), Olympic sponsorships offer brands a chance to align with deeply emotional, cultural, and patriotic narratives. This alignment can elevate the brand beyond commercial identity, positioning it as part of a collective story.

Therefore, sport sponsorship is not simply about visibility or awareness. It is also a symbolic and strategic act, where brands aim to become part of a shared cultural discourse. The sponsorship agreement facilitates not only exposure but also meaning transfer—from the values of the sport to the identity of the brand. In the context of this study, Olympic sponsorship will be examined as a mechanism through which brands like Yili or Mengniu leverage sport's symbolic capital to project ideologies, including nationalism and gender norms.

Understanding how sponsorship works—structurally, cognitively, and symbolically—is essential to analysing how sport brands communicate in complex cultural settings. As the next section will show, sponsorship does not operate in isolation but interacts with broader symbolic consumption and media narratives, shaping the way sport becomes a stage for ideological expression.

2.4 Olympic Sponsorship and Commercialisation

2.4.1 The Rise of Olympic Commercialisation

The Olympic Games represent one of the most powerful global platforms for cultural, political, and commercial exchange. As a worldwide spectacle, the Games have evolved into a key site for brand communication and sponsorship activities, offering unparalleled visibility and symbolic resonance. The commercialisation of the Olympics has fundamentally

transformed both its financial structure and cultural meaning. This chapter explores the historical development of Olympic commercialisation, the structure of its sponsorship systems, the controversies surrounding the increasing dominance of corporate interests, and the symbolic and strategic value that Olympic sponsorship offers to global brands. These discussions provide essential context for understanding the branding dynamics examined later in this study.

The relationship between commerce and the Olympic Games has a long history, yet systematic commercialisation only accelerated during the late twentieth century. Early modern Olympics, from Athens 1896 to the mid-twentieth century, operated on limited budgets and relied heavily on philanthropy, ticket sales, and modest governmental support. Commercial sponsorships were sporadic and largely informal, with little institutionalised marketing infrastructure (Barney et al., 2002).

A critical turning point occurred in 1984 with the Los Angeles Olympics, often described as the first fully commercialised Games. Facing the withdrawal of substantial public funding, the Los Angeles Organising Committee (LAOOC) adopted an aggressive private-sector model, securing sponsorship deals, exclusive licensing agreements, and broadcast rights sales. The financial success of the 1984 Games demonstrated that private funding could not only sustain the Olympics but also generate significant surplus revenue, reshaping the economic blueprint of future Games (Toohey & Veal, 2007).

Building on this model, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) institutionalised a new commercial programme through the launch of The Olympic Programme (TOP) in 1985. The TOP initiative introduced a tiered global sponsorship system, granting exclusive marketing rights to a limited number of multinational corporations across all Olympic properties. By selling category exclusivity and global marketing packages, the IOC reduced reliance on host city governments and diversified its revenue streams. According to Preuss (2004), the introduction of the TOP programme marked the beginning of the Olympics as a branded, global commercial enterprise.

Another major revenue stream emerged through the global sale of broadcast rights. Media partnerships, particularly with American television networks, became instrumental in driving both visibility and financial growth. The negotiation of lucrative broadcasting contracts transformed the Games into a prime-time media spectacle, attracting not only sports

audiences but also commercial advertisers (Payne, 2006). Media coverage amplified the global reach of Olympic sponsors, reinforcing the value of corporate investment.

Therefore, since the 1980s, the Olympic movement has increasingly relied on two main commercial pillars: sponsorship and media rights sales. By 2016, these two streams accounted for over 90% of IOC revenues (IOC, 2017). Sponsorship is no longer an ancillary activity but a core element of the Olympic business model. Brands invest millions to associate themselves with the values of excellence, unity, and peace that the Olympics symbolically represent. In return, the IOC carefully protects the exclusivity of sponsors, enforcing strict branding regulations and "clean venues" policies to prevent ambush marketing.

The commercialisation of the Olympics has thus been characterised by a gradual but decisive shift from amateur ideals to a highly professionalised, corporate-driven enterprise. While this transformation has secured the financial sustainability of the Games, it has also introduced tensions between commercial imperatives and traditional Olympic values—a theme explored further in subsequent sections.

2.4.2 Structures of Olympic Sponsorship

The structure of Olympic sponsorship is highly sophisticated, designed to protect brand exclusivity while maximising commercial revenue. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) manages a three-tiered marketing system that operates at global, national, and local levels, ensuring that sponsorship rights are carefully allocated and activated across different contexts (Payne, 2006).

At the apex of this system is The Olympic Partner (TOP) Programme, established in 1985. The TOP programme grants a small number of multinational corporations exclusive worldwide rights to associate with the Olympics and to use the Olympic symbols, such as the Rings and the motto, across all media platforms and product categories. TOP sponsors benefit from unparalleled global exposure and affiliation with the core Olympic values of excellence, respect, and friendship. In exchange, the IOC ensures strict category exclusivity, meaning that direct competitors are excluded from sponsorship at all levels. According to Preuss (2004), this exclusivity increases the perceived prestige and value of being a TOP partner, justifying the significant investment required for entry.

The second tier operates through Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs). These committees, established by the host cities, negotiate domestic sponsorship agreements. National or regional brands can secure marketing rights within the host country, but they must operate in categories not already occupied by TOP sponsors. OCOG sponsorships often include partnerships with airlines, telecommunications companies, financial institutions, and consumer goods brands. These sponsors typically receive rights to use Olympic imagery within the host nation and may engage in co-branding campaigns tied to the Games.

At the third level, National Olympic Committees (NOCs) manage sponsorship programmes within their respective countries, independently of the Games' hosting arrangements. NOCs use sponsorship to fund athlete development, training programmes, and domestic Olympic initiatives. Again, category conflicts with TOP sponsors are avoided to maintain the integrity of the global system. For instance, the British Olympic Association (BOA) maintains a roster of national sponsors that support Team GB, while ensuring alignment with the IOC's broader marketing rules.

The efficiency of this three-layered model ensures a wide range of commercial support without diluting the brand value of the Olympics. Each sponsor, whether global or national, benefits from a well-defined set of rights and activation opportunities tailored to their marketing goals.

A useful illustration of the system's operation can be seen in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. While global brands such as Coca-Cola and Intel participated as TOP sponsors, Chinese companies such as Mengniu, Anta, and China Unicom secured domestic partnerships through the Beijing OCOG. These brands activated their sponsorships through integrated campaigns combining traditional media, digital engagement, and experiential marketing, thereby amplifying both their commercial interests and the Olympic message. Similarly, at the London 2012 Games, a careful balance was maintained between global sponsors like Visa and McDonald's and national sponsors such as British Airways and Lloyds TSB.

In this multi-tiered model, activation strategies—the ways sponsors leverage their rights—are crucial. Effective activation transforms passive logo placement into dynamic consumer engagement, often through storytelling, athlete endorsements, event experiences, and digital innovations (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005). Thus, the success of an Olympic

sponsorship depends not only on access to the brand assets but also on the creativity and authenticity with which those assets are deployed.

Overall, the structure of Olympic sponsorship reflects a deliberate strategy to protect the uniqueness of the Olympic brand while allowing for broad commercial participation across different markets.

2.4.3 Controversies and Cultural Critiques

Despite the financial success of Olympic commercialisation, the increasing dominance of corporate interests has generated significant controversy. Critics argue that the Olympic movement's heavy reliance on multinational sponsors contradicts its founding ideals of amateurism, fairness, and universalism (Barney et al., 2002). The pursuit of revenue is often seen as compromising the ethical and cultural integrity of the Games, leading to what Næss (2014) terms the 'commercial paradox'—the tension between the Olympic ideals and the realities of corporate dependency.

One major area of concern is the nature of the sponsors themselves. Brands associated with products such as fast food, sugary drinks, and alcohol have frequently been criticised for promoting unhealthy lifestyles, which appear inconsistent with the Olympic ethos of health and athletic excellence. For example, McDonald's and Coca-Cola, long-term TOP partners, have faced repeated public scrutiny for sponsoring events that celebrate physical fitness while selling products linked to obesity and health issues (Lenskyj, 2008). These contradictions have sparked debates about whether the IOC prioritises commercial interests over the social values it claims to uphold.

Moreover, the exclusivity granted to sponsors has raised concerns about access and fairness. Strict "clean venue" policies, which ban non-sponsors from displaying logos within Olympic sites, are viewed by some as excessive protection of commercial rights at the expense of local businesses and cultural diversity (Payne, 2006).

The political dimension of sponsorship has also attracted criticism. In certain cases, the association between the Olympics and specific host nations has exposed corporate sponsors to political risks. The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, for instance, saw diplomatic boycotts from several countries over human rights concerns, placing sponsors in a difficult

position. Brands faced the dilemma of either supporting the Games and risking reputational damage, or withdrawing and forfeiting substantial investments (Boykoff, 2024).

Therefore, while Olympic sponsorship offers substantial marketing benefits, it simultaneously entangles brands in complex ethical and political debates. This duality highlights the need for sponsors to engage not only in brand activation but also in careful reputation management, ensuring that their association with the Olympics remains a source of strength rather than vulnerability.

2.4.4 Symbolic and Strategic Values of the Olympics

Beyond immediate financial returns, Olympic sponsorship provides significant symbolic and strategic value for participating brands. Associating with the Games enables brands to align themselves with powerful universal ideals such as excellence, perseverance, and global unity. As Gwinner and Eaton (1999) argue, this transfer of image allows consumers to associate the positive symbolic meanings of the Olympics with the sponsoring brand, thereby enhancing brand equity and emotional resonance.

A key theoretical mechanism underpinning this transfer is self-image congruence. According to Sirgy and Su (2000), consumers are more likely to form positive attitudes and loyalties towards brands that reflect their actual or aspirational self-concepts. Olympic sponsorship offers an ideal context for activating such congruence, by embedding the brand within narratives of achievement, health, community, and national pride. Similarly, Cornwell (2020) suggests that emotional alignment through sponsorship strengthens consumer-brand relationships, moving beyond transactional visibility towards deeper symbolic attachment.

The construction of cultural capital is another strategic value of Olympic sponsorship. As Bourdieu (2018) theorised, cultural capital refers to the symbolic resources that confer social advantage. In the branding context, affiliation with prestigious global events like the Olympics can elevate a brand's perceived legitimacy, authenticity, and social relevance. Therefore, sponsorship is not merely an exercise in advertising reach but a mechanism for participating in shared cultural narratives.

However, the symbolic benefits of sponsorship are not automatic. According to Chadwick and Thwaites (2005), the effectiveness of image transfer depends on perceived fit, authenticity, and strategic storytelling. Brands that fail to align their values, products, and

communication strategies with the Olympics' ideals risk undermining the symbolic potential of their investment. In contrast, skilful integration of Olympic themes into brand narratives can facilitate long-term loyalty and differentiation in competitive markets.

Chinese brands have increasingly adopted these symbolic strategies in their Olympic sponsorships. For instance, Mengniu's partnership with the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics was framed around narratives of national pride and collective effort, positioning the dairy brand as a symbol of China's modern vitality. Yili similarly leveraged messages of health, strength, and perseverance, closely associating its brand identity with the aspirational values celebrated at the Games. Anta, as the official sportswear provider, used its sponsorship to reinforce its image as a homegrown champion supporting world-class athletic performance, enhancing both domestic prestige and international aspirations.

These Chinese sponsorship campaigns are particularly relevant to the present study. They illustrate how brands not only seek commercial gains but also participate actively in constructing broader ideological narratives, including nationalism and notions of gendered strength. Although the existing literature on Olympic sponsorship highlights symbolic transfer and emotional engagement (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Cornwell, 2020), few studies have systematically examined how sponsorship is strategically deployed to serve nationalistic or sociocultural agendas, particularly in non-Western contexts.

In summary, Olympic sponsorship serves as a powerful vehicle for symbolic meaning-making, enabling brands to embed themselves within global narratives of excellence, unity, and aspiration. The theoretical frameworks discussed here provide a foundation for analysing how brands, particularly those in China, utilise Olympic associations to communicate broader ideological positions. This symbolic perspective will underpin the subsequent analysis of the interplay between nationalism, gender, and branding strategies in Olympic advertising.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed key developments in the fields of sport marketing, symbolic consumption, sponsorship theory, and Olympic commercialisation, highlighting their relevance to the study of branding, identity, and ideology in sport contexts. It has shown how the evolution of sport marketing reflects a broader cultural shift from transactional

exchange to symbolic and emotional engagement, positioning brands not merely as commercial actors but as participants in meaning-making practices. The discussion of symbolic consumption has provided a critical lens for understanding how consumers invest cultural and social meaning in sport-related products and experiences. The review of sponsorship theory, particularly sponsor–property fit and image transfer mechanisms, has illuminated the strategic processes through which brands seek to align themselves with sporting properties to enhance consumer perceptions and emotional loyalty.

The analysis of Olympic sponsorship structures has further demonstrated how the Games have evolved into a complex commercial and ideological platform, where brands leverage the event’s symbolic power to communicate narratives of excellence, unity, and national identity. However, while much existing literature addresses commercial strategies and branding outcomes, there remains limited attention to how sponsorships function within non-Western ideological frameworks and how audiences interpret symbolic meanings in culturally specific contexts.

These gaps underscore the need for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive understanding of Olympic sponsorship, particularly in China’s rapidly evolving media and political environment. The insights from this chapter lay the groundwork for the next chapter, which examines how Olympic sponsorship has developed within the Chinese context, and how state ideology, national narratives, and corporate branding intersect to shape the symbolic meanings of the Games.

3. The Development of Sport and the Olympic Games in China

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the theoretical foundations of sport marketing and Olympic sponsorship, emphasising the global commercialisation of sport and the symbolic value embedded in sponsorship activities. While extensive research has explored the dynamics of Olympic marketing in Western contexts, relatively fewer studies have examined how these mechanisms operate within China's unique socio-political and cultural environment.

Building on this foundation, this chapter reviews the development of sport and the Olympic Movement in China, considering their role in national modernisation, international image construction, and soft power projection. Existing literature highlights the strategic significance of the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Games as platforms for promoting China's global identity, as well as the interplay between state narratives, corporate sponsorship, and national branding. Furthermore, emerging research into individual athletes, notably Eileen Gu, illustrates how personal branding intersects with broader political and cultural narratives.

By consolidating existing studies on China's Olympic engagement, this chapter aims to situate the subsequent theoretical discussion. It highlights the need for a more detailed examination of the symbolic strategies used in Olympic marketing communication, which will be addressed through the semiotic framework introduced in the following chapters.

3.2 The Evolution of Sport in China

Since the adoption of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978, China has undergone rapid economic and social transformation. Accompanying this broader development, the Chinese sports industry has evolved from a state-controlled tool of ideological education into a market-oriented and increasingly commercial sector (Fan, 1997; Zhan, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Lin, 2019). The growth in public demand for sports participation, alongside the expansion of sports events and infrastructure, reflects the changing role of sport within Chinese society (Huang et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018).

Academic attention towards the sports sector emerged in parallel with these transformations. Fan (1997) provided early insights into the commercialisation of Chinese sport between 1949 and 1993, while Zhan (2016) outlined the evolution of sports policy from 1978 to 2008, categorising its development into four stages: budding (1978–1992),

exploration (1992–1998), integration (1998–2008), and ongoing development (2008 onwards).

During the budding phase (1978–1992), sport in China began shifting from a purely ideological domain towards a more diversified role. Following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978, sports policy increasingly emphasised social participation under a “planned commodity economy” framework (Zhan, 2016). Although administrative control remained dominant, early reforms allowed greater community engagement and the gradual emergence of a sports market, albeit within a system still prioritising public welfare over profit.

The exploration stage (1992–1998) marked a significant turning point, as the 14th Party Congress formally endorsed the socialist market economy model. During this period, sport was incorporated more fully into national economic planning. Government policies, including the *Development Guidelines for the Sport Industry (1995–2010)* and the *Outline of the National Fitness Programme (1995)*, explicitly promoted sport as a sector capable of generating economic output and providing employment (Zhan, 2016). Nevertheless, core sports resources and elite events remained tightly controlled by state authorities, limiting the full realisation of market mechanisms.

The integration phase (1998–2008) witnessed substantial growth in the scale of the sports economy. The restructuring of the National Sports Commission into the General Administration of Sport of China in 1998 symbolised a closer alignment between sports administration and national economic strategies. Policies such as the *Three Industry Planning Regulations (2003)* classified sport as part of China’s tertiary industry alongside culture and entertainment. However, as Zhan (2016) observes, many sport industry policies during this period were criticised for their broad, slogan-driven language and limited operational clarity, which hindered coherent policy implementation.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games constituted a watershed moment, not only for China’s international image but also for its domestic sports industry. Hosting the Games stimulated unprecedented investment in sports infrastructure and event management, accelerating the integration of sport with tourism, leisure, and manufacturing sectors. In the subsequent development phase (2008 onwards), a series of policies such as the *Guidance for Accelerating the Development of the Sport Industry (2010)* and the *Opinions about Speeding up the Development of the Sport Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption (2014)* further

institutionalised sport as a pillar of economic growth. The 2014 document notably set a target for the total value of the sports industry to exceed 5 trillion RMB by 2025, positioning sport as an instrument of sustainable national development.

Statistical evidence confirms the sector's rapid expansion. The output value of China's sports industry rose from RMB 950 billion in 2012 to RMB 1,900 billion in 2016, accounting for 0.9 per cent of GDP (General Administration of Sports of China, 2018; Lin, 2019). By 2019, the sector's contribution to the national economy had grown to 1.1 per cent (General Administration of Sports of China, 2020). While impressive, this proportion remains modest compared to developed economies, where the sports sector typically contributes between 2 and 3 per cent of GDP (Liu et al., 2017; Ren & Dai, 2020).

Alongside overall growth, structural challenges have persisted. The industry has historically been dominated by the manufacturing and retailing of sporting goods, which in 2014 accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the total output, whereas sports activities and services comprised only 20 per cent (China Daily, 2015; Liu et al., 2017). Encouragingly, the proportion of the sport service industry rose to 67.7 per cent by 2019, indicating a gradual rebalancing towards higher value-added services (General Administration of Sports of China, 2020).

Scholars such as Dong (2012), and Zhang et al. (2018a) have highlighted the dual role of government policy and market forces in shaping this trajectory. On one hand, government initiatives provided the structural conditions for growth through investments, subsidies, and regulatory frameworks. On the other, increasing consumer demand for sports-related goods and experiences reflected broader societal changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns.

In conclusion, the transformation of China's sports sector reflects the broader shift from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market system. The Olympic Games, particularly the 2008 Beijing Olympics, served as critical accelerators in embedding sport within national economic and political strategies. The emergence of a market-oriented sports industry has created new opportunities for commercialisation and global engagement, setting the foundation for further analysis of how the Olympic Games, marketing practices, and national identity construction intertwine in the contemporary Chinese context.

3.3 The Olympic Games in China

3.3.1 China's Olympic Dreams

China's Olympic Dreams are not solely about sporting achievements, but also deeply intertwined with the projection of soft power and the construction of national identity. The intersection of sport and international politics has increasingly been recognised as a critical element in shaping a country's international image. Soft power refers to the ability of a country to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, influencing others by appealing to shared values, prosperity, and cultural appeal (Nye, 2004 cited by Cristo, 2005). At the international level, sport serves as a potent vehicle for this form of influence, enabling states to cultivate a favourable global image, assert cultural identity, and legitimise political systems.

In the Chinese context, sport has historically been closely linked to the broader project of national modernisation. As Jarvie et al. (2008) argue, the development of modern sport in China reflects wider processes of political, cultural, and social transformation. From the late nineteenth century, when notions of sport and physical education first entered Chinese discourse, China recognised the symbolic power of athletic performance as a marker of national strength and vitality (Luo & Huang, 2013). Particularly in overcoming the humiliations associated with colonial subjugation and the "sick man of East Asia" narrative (Cui, 2013), sport evolved from a leisure activity into a medium for reclaiming national pride. Participation in the Olympic Movement in China was seen as an essential step in this reassertion of national dignity. Despite initial exclusion and diplomatic struggles, China's persistent efforts to integrate into the Olympic family — including hosting smaller international events after its failed 1993 Olympic bid — illustrate the strategic value attributed to sport within the broader architecture of soft power (Luo & Huang, 2013; Cui, 2013).

The pursuit of Olympic success was motivated not only by sporting ambition but also by the symbolic rewards of international recognition and domestic unity. According to Fan and Lu (2020), China's Olympic ambitions were underpinned by three interrelated motivations: psychological, political, and economic.

Firstly, at a psychological level, hosting the Olympic Games and achieving sporting success has been crucial in alleviating collective historical grievances and fostering national pride in China. As noted by the Chinese Olympic Committee, the concept of 'sport' had no

equivalent in Chinese vocabulary until the nineteenth century, reflecting the late adoption of Western physical culture (Jarvie et al., 2008). Sport subsequently became a key instrument in constructing a modern national identity. According to Cui (2013), the negative stereotype or label of the “sick man of East Asia” or [Dongya bingfu] as weak Chinese people emerged during the Western invasions in the mid-nineteenth century, symbolising national weakness and humiliation. Although initially viewed as a form of Western cultural imperialism, international sport — particularly the Olympic Games — was later appropriated by China as a means of overcoming this historical stigma. Hosting major international sporting events became a symbolic act of national rejuvenation, challenging colonial narratives and a platform for the nation to demonstrate strength and modernity. (Cui, 2013; Fan & Lu, 2020).

Secondly, the political motivation behind China's pursuit of the Olympic Games is closely linked to the country's efforts to assert its international identity. Following the Communist victory and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the PRC government recognised the Olympics as an essential international platform for national representation (Fan & Lu, 2020). For three decades, Beijing and Taipei contested the legitimate representation of China within the Olympic Movement, culminating in the 1979 reinstatement of the PRC's seat at the International Olympic Committee (Eaton, 2019). Under the 'Olympic Formula,' Taiwan participated as 'Chinese Taipei,' using neither its national flag nor anthem (Cui, 2013). As Mangan and Ok (2013) argue, sport serves as a prism through which national identity and global image are refracted. Between 1980 and 2008, China's engagement with the Olympics evolved beyond sporting success, becoming a strategic tool for enhancing soft power and demonstrating national rejuvenation (Eaton, 2019). Hosting the Games, particularly the 2008 Beijing Olympics, symbolised not only China's economic modernisation and political stability but also its re-entry into the international community as a respected and responsible actor (Cui, 2013). Thus, China's participation in global sporting events reflects a broader ambition to reshape international perceptions, shifting from a marginalised post-colonial nation to a confident global power.

Thirdly, economically, hosting and participating in global sporting events has been recognised as an avenue for promoting China's integration into the global market economy. As one of the world's most powerful sporting brands, the Olympic Games offer extensive marketing and consumer opportunities (Söderman & Dolles, 2015). Since the success of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, hosting the Games has become a highly profitable enterprise (Magdalinski & Nauright, 2012; Macintosh et al., 2012; Smart, 2018). For Beijing 2008, the

International Olympic Committee (IOC) provided over US\$1 billion through television rights and sponsorships, with total expenditure reaching approximately US\$1.6 billion (Fan & Lu, 2020). In addition, the Chinese government anticipated that hosting the Games would attract foreign investment and encourage domestic economic growth by enticing major enterprises into the Chinese market (Fan & Lu, 2020). Moreover, the Games played a symbolic role in promoting consumerism among the Chinese public, with Olympic merchandising sales reaching US\$163 million and over 2,000 products available in 10,000 retail outlets (Smart, 2018). Thus, the economic dimension of hosting the Olympics extended beyond immediate profits to the broader goals of market expansion, global economic integration, and fostering consumer identity within China.

The use of sport as a soft power tool thus operates on multiple levels. It satisfies domestic audiences by fostering national pride, it secures political legitimacy on the international stage, and it facilitates economic modernisation through global market integration. This multi-dimensional strategy reflects the broader ambitions of China's "peaceful rise," whereby cultural diplomacy, economic engagement, and political assertion are carefully coordinated to enhance China's international stature.

At the same time, China's use of sport to project soft power also reveals the tensions inherent in globalisation and cultural exchange. While sport offers a platform for projecting national identity, it also exposes states to global scrutiny and contestation. As China's international engagement deepened through sport, questions about political freedoms, human rights, and cultural values increasingly accompanied its growing athletic success. Thus, the relationship between sport and soft power remains complex, dynamic, and deeply entangled with broader issues of national image, identity politics, and international relations.

3.3.2 Beijing 2008: The Symbolism of a Rising China

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games were a landmark in Olympic history, becoming the most watched and most digitally accessible Games to date, reaching a potential television audience of 4.3 billion people (IOC, 2008; Fan & Lu, 2020; Söderman & Dolles, 2015). Under the slogan "One World, One Dream," Beijing 2008 was positioned as a symbol of unity, technological advancement, and China's emergence as a global power (Price & Dayan, 2009). This slogan also reflected China's aspiration to promote global integration, peaceful development, and cultural inclusivity, positioning itself not

only as an economic powerhouse but also as a responsible member of the international community.

The Beijing Organising Committee (BOCOG) secured record sponsorship revenues, totalling US\$1,218 million (Fan & Lu, 2020). Five official Olympic sponsorship tiers included 12 TOP Partners such as Coca-Cola, Lenovo, and Samsung (IOC, 2008; Söderman & Dolles, 2015). Collectively, Olympic sponsors invested around \$2 billion in China-related promotions (Rajesh, 2008). The sponsorship cost was substantial, with entry thresholds starting at 16 million yuan (sohu.com, 2007), limiting participation to leading domestic and international brands. Sponsors received rights to use Olympic trademarks and associate their brands with the Games, although Söderman and Dolles (2015) argue that some companies were encouraged by the government to participate in sponsorship to share financial responsibilities.

Beyond the economic achievements, Beijing 2008 also symbolised a broader transformation of China's urban landscape and national identity. The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games offered a critical platform for China to showcase its economic modernisation and growing cultural confidence. As argued by Grix and Lee (2013), hosting mega-events enables emerging nations to assert a renewed global identity, projecting economic strength and national pride. In Beijing's case, the extensive urban redevelopment projects, including the construction of the Olympic Green, the National Stadium, and improvements to transportation infrastructure, symbolised China's technological prowess and urban modernity (Brownell, 2008; Roche, 2020). These transformations were not limited to physical landscapes; they marked China's shift towards a globalised, consumer-oriented society while maintaining national characteristics.

In addition, Beijing 2008 was a deliberate exercise in national branding. Zhang and Zhao (2009) argue that China used the Games to reframe its international image, moving away from perceptions of political opacity towards one of openness, innovation, and cultural richness. Through a blend of traditional cultural performances and cutting-edge technological displays, China presented itself as a nation that could harmonise ancient civilisation with modern dynamism (Brownell, 2008).

Sponsorship activities also served to highlight China's economic ambitions. Domestic brands such as Lenovo and Yili exemplified the rise of Chinese corporations

capable of competing on the world stage. Lenovo's role as the first Chinese TOP sponsor illustrated the country's emerging corporate globalisation, while Yili's successful Olympic marketing campaign demonstrated the maturation of China's consumer culture (Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Grix & Brannagan 2016). Even smaller local brands like Hengyuanxiang sought to leverage Olympic visibility to boost international presence, illustrating how the Games functioned as a catalyst for both national and commercial aspirations (Brownell, 2008).

However, as Xu (2008) notes, China's deployment of soft power through the Olympics also faced tensions, as global audiences scrutinised issues such as human rights and censorship. Nonetheless, the overall Olympic narrative significantly enhanced China's international prestige and reinforced domestic cultural self-confidence, fulfilling both modernisation goals and soft power ambitions.

3.3.3 Beijing 2022: Projecting a Responsible Global Power in the Post-Pandemic Era

The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics represented a pivotal moment for China to project its national image as a responsible global power in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain international environment. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating geopolitical tensions, Beijing 2022 was framed as a demonstration of China's resilience, commitment to sustainability, and leadership in fostering global solidarity.

The official slogan of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, "Together for a Shared Future," encapsulated China's aspiration to promote a vision of global unity and cooperation. Unlike the 2008 Games, which focused on "One World, One Dream" with a theme of global integration, the 2022 slogan emphasised a collective response to global challenges, particularly the pandemic (Hwang & Huang, 2023). The opening ceremony, rich in symbolism, portrayed themes of peace, cooperation, and environmental stewardship, reflecting China's intent to project a more empathetic and humanistic global image (Wang et al., 2024). Through cultural performances highlighting shared human experiences rather than nationalistic displays, China sought to position itself as a benevolent actor advocating for a common global destiny (Cabula & Pochettino, 2023).

China's communication strategy during the Games carefully reinforced this narrative. As Liu and Qi (2025) note, domestic media focused on framing Beijing 2022 within positive themes of resilience, solidarity, and the universal values of the Olympic spirit, counterbalancing criticisms from Western outlets (Boykoff, 2024). This consistent messaging aimed to consolidate China's soft power appeal by aligning the Winter Games with broader humanitarian ideals.

Beijing 2022 also heavily emphasised sustainability and technological innovation, presenting itself as the first Winter Olympics to fully implement carbon-neutral practices. The use of CO₂ refrigerants in ice venues, the recycling of 2008 Olympic infrastructure, and the deployment of renewable energy for all competition venues demonstrated China's commitment to green development (Shi & Zhang, 2022). These initiatives were not merely technical achievements but strategic symbols of China's leadership in sustainable innovation at a time when global climate action was increasingly urgent. Moreover, Beijing's management of the COVID-19 risks through a sophisticated closed-loop system, mass testing, and strict protocols showcased its administrative capacity and resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges (McCloskey et al., 2024). The ability to host a large-scale international event safely during a pandemic served as a powerful statement of state capability and social order, further reinforcing China's intended image as a reliable and responsible power in times of crisis (Diodato & Strina, 2023).

The marketing framework for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics was built upon a comprehensive sponsorship system, comprising 13 Worldwide Olympic Partners, including brands such as Airbnb, Alibaba, Visa, and Samsung, alongside a four-tier domestic sponsorship structure (IOC, 2022a). Coca-Cola and Mengniu entered into an unprecedented joint sponsorship agreement with the International Olympic Committee, co-owning the non-alcoholic beverage category until 2032 (Carp, 2019; IOC, 2021b). This collaboration marked a significant expansion of Chinese corporate presence within the global Olympic marketing framework. However, the agreement provoked tensions in the domestic market, notably with Yili Group, the official dairy sponsor of Beijing 2022, which criticised Mengniu for allegedly misleading consumers regarding its Olympic affiliation (Campaignasia.com, 2019; Kang, 2019). Despite the controversy, Mengniu strategically avoided direct Olympic branding, instead promoting its association with winter sports through athlete endorsements, including Eileen Gu.

Beyond the technical and economic success, Beijing 2022 provided a critical platform for China to advance its leadership narrative on the global stage. Hosting the Olympics during a period marked by diplomatic boycotts and heightened geopolitical divisions demonstrated China's determination to engage with the world on its own terms. As Diodato and Strina (2023) argue, the Games became a form of "Olympic diplomacy," whereby China sought to portray itself as a stabilising force amid global instability.

China's approach to the Winter Olympics also highlighted the interplay between domestic national pride and international outreach. Yang et al. (2023) found that public discourse on Chinese social media platforms strongly endorsed the Winter Games, reinforcing collective confidence in China's governance and international standing. At the same time, by showcasing high-profile achievements in infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and sportsmanship, China positioned itself as a leading advocate for multilateralism and shared progress.

However, the international reception was mixed. While China's technical successes in hosting the Games were widely acknowledged, concerns regarding human rights, political freedoms, and geopolitical assertiveness remained salient in Western media narratives (Boykoff, 2024; European Olympic Committees EU Office, 2021). Based on Strina and Göbbel (2023), the European contestation of Beijing 2022 further highlighted how the Olympics became a proxy arena for broader political disputes, with several European nations diplomatically boycotting the Games over human rights concerns. For instance, the European Parliament passed a resolution urging diplomatic boycotts unless verifiable human rights improvements were demonstrated (European Olympic Committees EU Office, 2021). Similarly, a UK Parliament Research Briefing highlighted the growing political opposition to China's hosting of the Games (UK Parliament, 2021). Nevertheless, by framing the Olympics around themes of common humanity and future-oriented cooperation, Beijing attempted to shift the discourse away from confrontation towards addressing shared global challenges (Cabula & Pochettino, 2023), reflecting both an adaptation and an evolution of its soft power strategy in a more adversarial international context.

In addition, to fully appreciate the evolution of China's Olympic strategy, it is instructive to situate Beijing 2022 in relation to the 2008 Summer Games, considering the shifting international landscape and narrative imperatives. A comparative perspective

reveals that while the 2008 Beijing Olympics were largely framed as China's "coming-out party," symbolizing its economic ascendance and international acceptance (Brownell, 2008; Xu, 2008), the 2022 Games unfolded amidst heightened global tensions and were subjected to more critical international scrutiny. Beyond serving as a platform for sporting achievements, both Olympic Games have been deeply intertwined with China's broader project of soft power projection and national identity construction. As Price and Dayan (2008) argue, the 2008 Beijing Olympics became a global battleground of competing narratives, where China sought to portray itself as a prosperous, modern, and harmonious nation, while international actors leveraged the event to spotlight issues such as human rights and political freedoms. This duality underscores the inherent instability of mega-events as contested sites of meaning-making, revealing both the potential and the limitations of sport as an instrument of soft power.

Building upon the 2008 experience, China's strategic use of sport to enhance its international image continued with the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Unlike the Summer Games, however, the Winter Olympics carry distinct connotations of exclusivity and Western cultural dominance. As Lee (2021) notes in his analysis of the Sochi, PyeongChang, and Beijing Winter Games, non-Western hosts have increasingly utilized the Winter Olympics to assert their position within the global capitalist order and to craft narratives of cultural modernity. Although China's ambition to leverage the 2022 Games for further global ascendance was evident, rising skepticism in the West significantly complicated its efforts at cultural diplomacy.

3.3.4 Eileen Gu in Olympic marketing and the New Cultural Symbolism

The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics not only served as a platform for China's national image construction but also witnessed the emergence of Eileen Gu as a complex symbol of transnational identity, national pride, and commercial success. Gu's prominence both on the slopes and in media narratives illustrates the intertwining of sport, nationalism, and commercialisation in China's soft power strategy.

Eileen Gu, born in the United States to a Chinese mother and American father, won two gold medals and one silver medal in freestyle skiing at the Beijing 2022 Games (Branch, 2022). Her success positioned her as both a sporting heroine and a marketing phenomenon. According to Finance Yahoo (2022), she secured endorsements with at least 26 brands,

including three major Olympic sponsors—Anta, Mengniu, and Bank of China—earning over US\$30 million in contracts. This commercial success underscored her dual role as an elite athlete and a potent marketing icon during the Games.

Anta Sports, an official partner of the Chinese Olympic Committee and the Beijing 2022 Games, capitalised significantly on Gu's image. Anta's marketing strategy integrated patriotic symbols, such as the "gold Chinese dragon" uniform worn by Gu during her competition victories, reinforcing nationalist sentiment while promoting its products (IOC, 2021b; SCMP.com, 2022). The surge in sales of Olympic-themed merchandise, particularly items associated with Gu and the mascot Bing Dwen Dwen, illustrated the powerful synergy between sport, commercial branding, and national pride (Dong et al., 2022; Shi & Zhang, 2022). Through aggressive marketing campaigns and immersive consumer experiences, Anta successfully positioned itself as a national champion brand, leveraging Gu's appeal to boost its international and domestic visibility.

However, Gu's public persona was far more than a straightforward narrative of success. As Lyu et al. (2023) demonstrate, Chinese mainstream media constructed Gu's identity through a pluralistic lens, connecting her achievements with national pride, family ties, academic excellence, and Chinese cultural symbols. By portraying her as a "Beijing girl" rather than emphasising her American upbringing, the media effectively naturalised her Chinese identity to serve broader nation-building narratives. In this construction, Gu became emblematic of China's rejuvenation, embodying the ideal of a globally competitive yet culturally authentic Chinese citizen.

Nevertheless, Gu's dual identity provoked nuanced tensions. As Yang (2023) argues, Chinese media discursively legitimised Gu by framing her as a "neoliberal all-capable princess with Chinese characteristics." This portrayal served to reconcile public anxieties about her elite transnational background by situating her success within the state's broader goals of modernisation and cosmopolitanism. Her image thus alleviated potential social discontent about class inequalities and global mobility, while simultaneously aligning with state-sanctioned ideals of national progress and global competitiveness.

Internationally, Gu's identity narrative was subject to divergent interpretations. Zhang and Shi (2023) reveal that Chinese and American media framed her in contrasting ways: Chinese outlets celebrated her as the "descendant of the dragon," a symbol of national resurgence, whereas American media highlighted her as an "American dreamer," emphasising

her ties to the United States and individual agency. This bifurcated media discourse underscores the complexities inherent in Gu's public image and highlights the entanglement of sport, nationalism, and globalisation in contemporary identity politics.

Furthermore, Gu's carefully curated ambiguity regarding her citizenship status added another layer of complexity. Despite the legal requirements under Chinese nationality law, no official confirmation exists regarding her renunciation of US citizenship (Lyu et al. 2023). This ambiguity allowed her to simultaneously embody transnational cosmopolitanism and national allegiance, catering to different audience expectations while avoiding direct political confrontation.

From a critical perspective, Gu's commercial success and symbolic role were deeply entwined with broader trends of neoliberalism and soft power deployment in sports. As Li (2024) points out, Gu's personal branding strategy on social media emphasised self-discipline, perseverance, and positivity—values resonant with both Chinese nationalism and global neoliberal ideals of self-entrepreneurship. Her endorsements with major Olympic sponsors, especially Mengniu, Anta, and Bank of China, exemplify how sport stars are mobilised to promote both consumerism and national narratives simultaneously.

Nonetheless, the heavy commodification of Gu's image also revealed the fragility of state-led soft power campaigns. As highlighted by Boykoff (2022), international media scepticism towards China's human rights record and political system inevitably complicated Gu's symbolic role abroad. While domestically she was hailed as a national heroine, internationally, her success could not fully neutralise criticisms directed at the broader political context of the Beijing 2022 Olympics.

In sum, Eileen Gu's case encapsulates the evolving dynamics of sport, identity, and soft power in a globalised world. As both a national symbol and a transnational celebrity, she represents a strategic but delicate asset for China's image-building efforts. Her success at Beijing 2022 demonstrates how individual athletes can be instrumentalised within broader national projects, but also highlights the contradictions and vulnerabilities inherent in such strategies under the conditions of globalisation and international scrutiny.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed how China has strategically engaged with the Olympic Games as a means of constructing national identity, projecting soft power, and promoting commercial and cultural narratives. By tracing the historical development of China's sports policies and its Olympic ambitions, the chapter outlined the role of sport as an instrument for political legitimacy, economic modernisation, and international positioning.

Existing literature indicates that hosting the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Games provided critical platforms for China to showcase its economic progress, technological innovation, and global leadership aspirations. Drawing on Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, studies have highlighted that Beijing 2008 was framed as a symbolic "coming-out" event, while Beijing 2022 emphasised resilience, sustainability, and global solidarity against the backdrop of pandemic and geopolitical tensions. At the same time, scholarly discussions acknowledge that China's soft power efforts through the Olympics have faced considerable challenges, particularly due to international concerns over human rights and political freedoms.

In relation to commercial branding, prior research has shown that Olympic sponsorships in China have often gone beyond market-driven objectives to serve broader nationalistic purposes. Brands such as Anta, Mengniu, and Lenovo have been observed aligning their corporate narratives with state discourses, reinforcing themes of patriotism and national pride. Furthermore, individual athletes such as Eileen Gu have been positioned as cultural symbols, embodying both China's global aspirations and internal constructions of modern identity.

Nevertheless, a review of the literature suggests notable gaps remain. While much scholarship has examined the macro-level use of the Olympics for state image-building, there is relatively limited focus on the micro-level semiotic processes through which meaning is constructed and disseminated in Olympic marketing and media communication. Specifically, the interaction between symbolic representations, consumer perception, and national narratives warrants deeper investigation.

In response to these gaps, the following chapters introduce semiotics as the theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis. Semiotics, focusing on the creation and interpretation of signs and meanings, offers valuable tools for examining how language, imagery, and symbolism have been employed in Olympic marketing to shape perceptions of China's national image. Chapter 4 will outline the fundamental principles of semiotic theory, while

Chapter 5 will apply these concepts within the context of sports communication, with particular reference to Olympic communication.

4. The Fundamentals of Semiotics

4.1 Introduction

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, examines their role in communication and meaning-making. It serves as a fundamental theoretical framework that intersects with various disciplines, including linguistics, media studies, cultural analysis, marketing, and political discourse. By providing a systematic methodology, semiotics enables scholars to explore how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and transmitted through different forms of signs. Originally conceptualised by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics has evolved into a comprehensive analytical approach that extends beyond language to encompass visual, auditory, and multimodal communication (Chandler, 2022). Its broad applicability underscores its relevance in contemporary society, particularly in the analysis of advertising, branding, sports media, and ideological discourse.

Semiotic analysis is particularly valuable in visual communication, offering a framework for decoding how images, symbols, and textual elements generate meaning within social and cultural contexts. It has been widely applied to the study of advertising, branding strategies, and political propaganda, where signs are strategically manipulated to construct associations, shape identities, and reinforce ideologies (Bell & Milic, 2002). In advertising and marketing, semiotics plays a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions, embedding symbolic meanings into brand identities and commercial messaging. In contemporary media, semiotics is particularly instrumental in sporting narratives, sponsorships, and athlete endorsements, revealing how symbolic representations in sports media reinforce cultural myths related to heroism, nationalism, and gender identity (Lee, 2015). This is especially evident in Olympic sponsorships and sports branding, where national symbols, athlete personas, and corporate logos are woven together to construct powerful narratives of competition, unity, and prestige. Additionally, semiotics plays a significant role in the Chinese media landscape, where symbols are deeply embedded in national identity, political messaging, and corporate branding (Iskanderova, 2024). The use of semiotic strategies in state media, propaganda, and advertising reflects the interplay between cultural tradition, ideological narratives, and market forces, making semiotic analysis an essential tool for understanding media discourse in a globalised world.

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of semiotics, tracing its origins, theoretical developments, and applications in contemporary media and communication

studies. It begins with an exploration of the foundations of semiotics, discussing Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist model, Charles Peirce's triadic theory, and Roland Barthes' concept of myth and second-order signification. This section highlights how these theories have shaped the study of meaning-making in various disciplines. The chapter then examines the application of semiotics in advertising, sports media, and Olympic marketing communication, analysing how brands, sponsorships, and visual narratives construct identities and influence consumer perception. The final section discusses semiotics and ideological discourse, focusing on nationalism and gender ideologies, illustrating how symbols and language sustain or challenge dominant social narratives.

4.2 Foundation of Semiotics

4.2.1 Origins

The origins of semiotics trace back to ancient Greek medicine, where the term σημεῖον (*sēmeion*) referred to signs used in medical diagnosis (Deely, 2003). However, its development into a structured theory of signs began with Augustine (c. 397 AD), who proposed an early definition of signs as elements that bring something else into cognition. This idea was refined in medieval philosophy, notably by Petrus Hispanus (c. 1245) and Poincot (1632), who established that signs operate as triadic relations (Deely, 2003). During the Age of Enlightenment, John Locke (1690) in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, treats semiotics together with physics and ethics as one of the three main branches of human knowledge. 'Semiotics' and 'semiology' overlap but they have different flavours. 'Semiotics' tends to relate more to the logical aspects of signs, whereas 'semiology' tends to relate more to the role that signs play in society and language (Stamper, 1993).

Modern semiotics emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with two independent, yet complementary theories developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. While both scholars aimed to understand how meaning is constructed, their approaches diverged significantly. While Saussure positioned semiology within linguistic structures, Peirce developed a broader framework, integrating cognition and interpretation (Deely, 2003). Over time, semiotics emerged as the dominant term, reflecting an interdisciplinary shift beyond linguistics into philosophy, media, and cultural studies (Gramigna & Madisson, 2023). Nonetheless, its disciplinary autonomy remains contested, as semiotics continues to evolve in response to technological and theoretical advancements

Based on Kull and Velmezova (2024), semiotics faces challenges in disciplinary recognition, methodological clarity, and interdisciplinary integration. It struggles with institutional instability, a lack of unified frameworks, and the risk of being absorbed into other fields.

4.2.2 Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, introduced the concept of semiology as a branch of social psychology aimed at understanding how meaning is produced through systems of signs. In his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), Saussure proposed a dyadic model of the sign, defining it as the combination of the signifier (the sound, image, or word form) and the signified (the mental concept it evokes) (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1994). This reconceptualisation framed language not as a tool for naming pre-existing things, but as a structured system governed by internal relational differences. His work laid the groundwork for structural linguistics, subsequently shaping structuralist approaches in cultural studies (Chandler, 1994; Johansen & Larsen, 2005).

A cornerstone of Saussure's theory is the principle of arbitrariness, which contends that the connection between signifier and signified is not natural but socially and historically determined (Kronenfeld & Decker, 1979). He introduced the idea of "radical arbitrariness", meaning that signs function by social convention, not by inherent logic or necessity (Kronenfeld & Decker, pp. 506–507). Meaning, in this framework, emerges from the differential relationships between signs within a network.

Equally significant is Saussure's emphasis on synchrony—the study of language as a system at a given point in time, abstracted from historical development. This synchronic perspective enabled a structuralist focus on deep linguistic organisation rather than surface-level historical change (Holdcroft, 1991). His chessboard analogy vividly illustrates how linguistic meaning arises from structural position rather than temporal sequencing (Kronenfeld & Decker, 1979). Structural anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss later applied this model to cultural phenomena, treating myths and kinship systems as analogous to linguistic structures.

However, Saussure's model has not gone unchallenged. Cognitive linguists argue that it overlooks the role of perceptual and experiential factors in shaping signification, particularly outside verbal language (Krampen, 1987). Furthermore, critics contend that his exclusive focus on synchrony neglects how language evolves through cultural, historical, and pragmatic transformations (Hussein & Abushihab, 2014).

Finally, Saussure's ideas have been widely misinterpreted. Later structuralists, especially those following Jakobsonian phonology, often exaggerated his formalist leanings while downplaying his central concern with meaning. As Kronenfeld and Decker (1979, p. 513) observe, modern structural linguistics tends to prioritise form at the expense of semantic and cognitive dimensions—an imbalance that distorts Saussure's original intentions.

4.2.3 Peirce

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) developed a triadic model of the sign, significantly broadening the scope of semiotics beyond language and into logic and cognition. Unlike Saussure's dyadic model, Peirce's sign comprises three interrelated components: the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter) (Peirce, 1931–1958). This triadic structure allows for a dynamic and recursive process known as semiosis, whereby each interpretant can become a new sign in an ongoing chain of meaning (Chandler, 2022).

Peirce further categorised signs into three modes: icons, which resemble their objects (e.g., portraits); indexes, which have a causal or existential link to their referents (e.g., smoke indicating fire); and symbols, whose relation to the object is based on social convention (e.g., language) (Atkin, 2010; Chandler, 2022). This taxonomy enabled Peirce to apply semiotic principles across a vast range of phenomena, from mathematics to theology.

Importantly, Peirce's model stressed the interpretative and evolutionary nature of meaning-making. As Short (2007) elaborates, Peirce saw signification as an instance of final causation—a goal-directed process involving the growth and development of signs over time. This conceptualisation of signs as self-transforming systems challenges static structuralist accounts and anticipates key concerns in poststructuralist theory (Short, 2022).

Despite its complexity, Peirce's semiotic remains foundational for contemporary theories of cognition and communication. As Chandler (2022) notes, Peircean semiotics encourages a more nuanced understanding of how signs operate within broader systems of meaning, offering a powerful alternative to more rigid structuralist paradigms.

Some scholars have drawn comparisons between Saussurean and Peircean semiotic theories, highlighting their differences. Peirce's semiotics challenges Saussure's principle of

arbitrariness by introducing iconic and indexical signs, where resemblance or causal relationships play a crucial role. Yakin and Totu (2014) argue that Saussurean semiotics, by focusing solely on linguistic structures, overlooks the semiotic processes inherent in visual and material culture, making it excessively language-centric.

Unlike Saussure's model, which defines meaning through fixed binary relationships, Peirce's semiotic framework emphasises the interpretative process, influencing later developments in pragmatic and cognitive semiotics (Danesi, 2000). Saussure's structuralist approach conceptualises the sign as a dyadic structure, consisting of the signifier and the signified, and operating within a self-contained linguistic system (Petrilli, 1993a). This model, shaped in part by marginalist economic theories, assumes an equal exchange between sign components, thereby limiting interpretative flexibility (Petrilli, 1993b). In contrast, Peirce's triadic model incorporates the interpretant, allowing for infinite semiosis and contextual fluidity (Petrilli, 1993a). Petrilli (1993b) critiques Saussure's framework as overly rigid and reductionist, arguing that meaning is not statically encoded but dynamically produced through interpretation, as evidenced by Peirce's evolving and open-ended sign process. While Saussure conceptualises language as a system of arbitrary signs governed by internal conventions, Peirce extends semiotic inquiry to encompass interpretants, thereby introducing an infinite chain of meaning-making. This distinction played a pivotal role in shaping structuralist and post-structuralist thought. Based on Batu (2012), structuralism sought to codify sign systems into a systematic framework, whereas post-structuralism, in critiquing such rigid classifications, proposed that meaning is never fixed but continuously deferred. Structuralist semiotics operates within a closed system, whereas post-structuralist perspectives challenge this assumption, advocating for an open-ended interpretation of signs and signification.

4.3 Structuralism

Structuralism emerged in post-war France during the 1950s, catalysed by a widespread disillusionment with prevailing ideological paradigms such as Marxism and existentialism (Lundy, 2013). It sought to replace subjective, historical analyses with a more scientific, synchronically oriented method for understanding cultural and social phenomena. Central to structuralism was the notion that systems—whether linguistic, social, or symbolic—possess underlying structures that can be objectively analysed through their

internal relations (Wahl, 1968; Lévi-Strauss, 1963 cited by Sturrock, 2008). This approach privileged the unapparent and unconscious logic of systems over visible historical development.

4.3.1 Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Structure Beneath Culture

Claude Lévi-Strauss, often regarded as the father of structuralism, revolutionised anthropology by applying Saussurean linguistic models to cultural systems, particularly kinship structures (Lundy, 2013). Influenced by Roman Jakobson, he proposed that cultural meaning arises not from isolated elements but from their structural relations. His anthropological project sought to uncover the invariant structures of human culture, especially in kinship and myth. Inspired by phonology, Lévi-Strauss argued that myths across diverse societies share an underlying grammar, despite surface-level variation. His *Mythologiques* series illustrates this approach by identifying binary oppositions and mediating structures as universal mental constants (Caws, 1968, p. 74).

Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on structure over content reflects a key insight: "structure has no content; it is itself the content, apprehended in a logical organisation conceived as a property of the real" (Caws, 1968, p. 74). His notion of *bricolage*—the process by which myths are constructed from culturally available materials—illustrates how meaning arises not from coherence but from relational organisation (Caws, 1968, pp. 76–77). Furthermore, in *La pensée sauvage*, he argued that so-called "primitive" classification systems reflect a "science of the concrete," not inferior thought but a different modality of ordering the world (Caws, 1968, p. 72).

Nevertheless, structuralism has been criticised for overreliance on metaphor and abstraction. Kronenfeld and Decker (1979) question the empirical robustness of Lévi-Strauss's "invariants" and argue that his structural method lacks linguistic precision. Similarly, Runciman (1969) warns that structuralism often reifies its models into universal truths, detaching analysis from historical specificity. Despite these criticisms, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism provided a profound shift in understanding culture as governed by deep, often unconscious, organising principles.

4.3.2 Jacques Lacan: Structuring the Unconscious

Jacques Lacan played a pivotal role in extending structuralist logic into psychoanalysis. Drawing upon Saussurean linguistics and Jakobson's phonological theory, Lacan famously asserted that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 2006, cited in Lundy, 2013). In his Rome Report (1953), Lacan explicitly aligned psychoanalysis with structuralism, arguing that meaning arises not from subjective intent but from the differential relations among signs—echoing Lévi-Strauss's relational approach to culture.

Lacan's commitment to synchronic analysis marked a decisive break from traditional developmental models in psychology. Through concepts such as the mirror stage and phallic signifier, Lacan restructured Freudian theory to position subjectivity within the symbolic order of language. This repositioning, as Caws notes, made psychoanalysis "an engagement with structure, not essence" (Caws, 1968, p. 85), situating the subject as an effect of language rather than a source of meaning.

However, Lacan's model is not without critique. Kronenfeld and Decker (1979) argue that his structuralism, like Lévi-Strauss's, is overly metaphorical, lacking empirical testability. They further critique Lacan's reliance on Jakobsonian linguistics, which reduces Saussure's complex sign theory to a narrow phonological framework (pp. 514–515). Caws similarly questions Lacan's self-reflexive formulations, highlighting how "the subject cannot be the object of science because it is its subject" (Caws, 1968, p. 85). For Lacan, the subject is better represented by paradoxes such as the Möbius strip, illustrating the impossibility of full self-knowledge.

Despite these critiques, Lacan's integration of semiotics and psychoanalysis crucially extended structuralism into the domain of identity and desire, bridging Lévi-Strauss's anthropology with Barthes's semiotics.

4.3.3 Roland Barthes (Early Phase): Systems of Signs

In the early phase of his career, Roland Barthes elaborated structuralist principles within the field of literary and cultural criticism. In works such as *Mythologies* and *Système de la mode*, Barthes dissected mass culture and fashion as systems of signs governed by rules analogous to language. These semiotic structures functioned ideologically, naturalising historically contingent values (Caws, 1968). His commitment to deciphering cultural codes

resonated with the structuralist aim of unmasking the latent order beneath cultural phenomena.

In the mid of 20th century, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) played a crucial role in the evolution of semiotics. He extended Saussurean semiotics expanding its application beyond linguistics to cultural analysis of media, fashion, advertising, and ideology. His work on mythologies (1957) demonstrated how media and advertising construct ideologically charged meanings, reinforcing cultural myths.

In Roland Barthes' early works, he expanded on Saussure's semiotics and adopted from Louis Hjelmslev's idea that signification operates at different levels, distinguishing between connotation and denotation (Barthes, 1957; Hjelmslev, 1961, 114 cited by Chandler, 2022). These are often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning. Denotation is at the first order of signification, referring to literal meaning. At this level, a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second-order of signification where the denotative sign (the signifier and signified) itself becomes a signifier for an added layer of meaning, often tied to cultural and ideological associations (Chambers, 2007; Bouzida, 2014).

In this framework, connotation arises from the signifier of a denotative sign, creating a sequence where denotation leads to further connotations (Chandler, 2022). This framework suggests that denotation is an underlying and primary meaning, although this idea has been questioned by many other commentators. Barthes himself later shifted his emphasis towards connotation, remarking in 1971 that it had become difficult to clearly separate the signifier from the signified, or the ideological from the 'literal' (Barthes, 1977, 166 cited by Chandler, 2022). It is also worth noting that 'what functions as a signifier or a signified depends entirely on the analytical level applied: a signified at one stage may act as a signifier at another' (Willemsen, 1994, 105). This highlights how signs can appear to convey one meaning while carrying several layers of interpretation.

Related to connotation is what Roland Barthes refers to as myth. While myths are commonly associated with ancient tales of gods and heroes, Barthes interpreted myths as the dominant ideologies of our time. In a departure from Hjelmslev's model, Barthes proposed that denotation and connotation together create ideology, which has sometimes been referred to (though not by Barthes himself) as a third order of signification (Barthes et al., 1967 cited by Chambers, 2007; Taverniers, 2008). In a very famous example from his essay 'Myth

Today' (in *Mythologies*), Barthes illustrated this concept in his famous essay 'Myth Today' in *Mythologies*. Myths, according to Barthes, function similarly to extended metaphors, helping individuals to interpret their experiences within a particular cultural context (Chandler, 2022). For example, in *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes analysed how everyday objects—such as advertisements and political symbols—construct ideological narratives through semiotic layering (Bouzida, 2014). He argued that popular culture naturalises dominant ideologies, making socially constructed meanings appear universal.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory has been instrumental in media studies, particularly in analysing how advertising and visual texts construct myths that embed ideological messages (A'la, 2011). His distinction between denotation and connotation is foundational in semiotic analysis of media. This method allows scholars to deconstruct ideological messages hidden within media narratives. Barthes' structuralist phase built on Saussure's view of language as a system of relational differences (O'Neill, 2008), as the structuralist method gained prominence, Barthes grew increasingly sceptical of its claims to objectivity. His later work moved towards post-structuralism, questioning the fixed meanings assumed in structuralist thought (Chandler, 2022). His eventual departure from structuralism set the stage for the emergence of poststructuralist critique—a transition marked poignantly in his essay "The Death of the Author".

However, while structuralism's pursuit of scientificity offered a compelling alternative to ideological critique, it was not without limitations. Its claims to universalism and ahistoricism invited later criticism for suppressing historical contingency and political complexity—a tension that would ultimately lead to its transformation within poststructuralism (Lundy, 2013).

4.4 Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism emerged as both a continuation and critique of structuralism, challenging its claims to objectivity, stability, and universal structure. While structuralism sought to uncover latent systems beneath cultural forms, poststructuralism insists that meaning is never fixed, but constantly deferred, contingent upon context, and entangled in power relations. Figures such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva reconfigured the roles of authorship, discourse, and the subject, replacing systematic certainty with interpretive multiplicity. This paradigm shift marks a profound epistemological

rupture, destabilising traditional hierarchies and inviting critical engagement with meaning-making in language, media, and society.

4.4.1 Roland Barthes (Late Phase): The Death of the Author

The turning point in Barthes' intellectual trajectory came with his 1967 essay, *La mort de l'auteur*, in which he famously declared the "death of the author" to liberate the multiplicity of meanings inherent in texts. In this essay, Barthes argues that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author," a statement that radically redefines the role of the reader as the primary agent in constructing meaning. Here, Barthes challenged the structuralist notion of stable meaning derived from a system by severing the tie between textuality and authorial intention. Meaning, he argued, arises not from a unifying origin (the author) but through the interplay of codes and the activity of the reader. This marks a pivotal move into poststructuralist territory: a rejection of closure, hierarchy, and univocality in favour of plurality and dispersal.

The implications of *The Death of the Author* extend beyond literature into media studies, where Barthes' perspective dismantles the traditional assumption that media texts convey fixed meanings determined by their creators (Bouzida, 2014). Meaning is actively negotiated by audiences through cultural and ideological codes. However, this emphasis on reader interpretation has been critiqued for leading to interpretative relativism, where meaning becomes overly subjective and detached from textual structures (Chandler, 2022). Moreover, digital media and interactive technologies challenge traditional semiotic frameworks, as meaning is increasingly shaped by dynamic, participatory interactions (O'Neill, 2008).

While Barthes' work remains central to semiotic media analysis, his later theories necessitate adaptation in contemporary contexts. As post-structuralist critiques continue to shape media and cultural studies, semiotic analysis must evolve beyond Barthesian binaries to account for the complexities of digital communication and interactive meaning-making processes.

Barthes' idea resonates with Derrida's (1976) concept of *différance*, which suggests that meaning is perpetually deferred, and Foucault's (1972) notion of the death of man, which challenges traditional notions of authorship and authority. Barthes' shift towards post-structuralism was influenced by figures such as Derrida, Kristeva, Lacan, and Nietzsche, leading him to explore textuality and intertextuality in works such as *The Pleasure of the Text*

(1973) (Xiao, 2019). Barthes' later works, such as *S/Z*, move toward a writing style and method that embody these poststructuralist principles. Texts are no longer treated as closed systems to be decoded but as open, unstable, and infinitely reinterpretable—what he called “writerly texts”. The structuralist project of systematisation gives way to a celebration of excess and difference.

4.4.2 Michel Foucault: Discourse, Power, and Epistemic Ruptures

Michel Foucault reoriented the structuralist project by introducing a fundamentally historical and political dimension into the analysis of discourse. Rather than seeking universal structures of meaning, Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods focused on the historical conditions and discursive practices that make certain statements intelligible and authoritative within specific contexts (Foucault, 1972; 1980). His work in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* exemplifies this shift by revealing how institutions—such as the prison, the clinic, or the school—produce knowledge not as neutral fact, but as deeply embedded within mechanisms of power (Blake & Masschelein, 2003).

In this framework, power is not solely repressive but generative; it creates subject positions and legitimates knowledge (Han, 2020). Foucault dismantled the structuralist reliance on a transcendental subject, asserting instead that the subject is an effect of discourse—an epistemological construction shaped by the interplay of power and knowledge (Chaffee & Lemert, 2008). His notion of the “author function” (Foucault, 1980) further destabilised humanist notions of agency, positing that authorship is not a natural expression of individual intent but a discursive role regulated by institutions (Han, 2020).

However, Foucault's approach has not been without critique. Manfred Frank (1989) argues that the celebration of the “death of the subject” borders on amorality, warning against a nihilistic embrace of dehumanisation in the name of critique (Frank, 1997). Likewise, Giddens (1986) criticises Foucault for reducing human agency to discursive effects, thereby marginalising the capacity for reflexive social action.

Nonetheless, Foucault's insights remain foundational for poststructuralist thought. He successfully repositioned the analysis of meaning from structural synchrony to discursive contingency, highlighting the epistemic violence embedded in knowledge production. His

legacy lies in problematising the "neutrality" of systems and tracing the historical ruptures through which discourses evolve and solidify.

4.4.3 Jacques Derrida: Différance and the Deconstruction of Structure

Jacques Derrida's work represents a radical critique from within the structuralist paradigm, aimed at deconstructing its foundational assumptions. In his influential essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida (1978) dismantled Lévi-Strauss's mythological analysis by exposing the metaphysical assumptions underlying the structuralist project—particularly the belief in a stable "centre" that anchors meaning.

Derrida introduced the concept of *différance*, a neologism that plays on the dual French meanings of "to differ" and "to defer," to articulate how meaning is always postponed, never fully present, and constituted through endless play within a chain of signifiers (Derrida, 1978). This undermines the structuralist confidence in binary oppositions and fixed systems, challenging the very notion of linguistic coherence that underpinned the work of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss (Han, 2020).

His method of deconstruction does not reject structure outright but interrogates the internal tensions and exclusions upon which it relies. As he noted, structuralism's reliance on a "centre" is an act of containment that restricts the "freeplay" of the structure—an attempt to reimpose metaphysical security in the guise of scientific objectivity (Derrida, 1978: 352). By displacing this centre, Derrida sought to reveal the instability at the heart of all representational systems.

However, Derrida himself has faced criticism. D'haen and Bertens (1995) and Merquior (1985) contend that deconstruction lapses into political indeterminacy and textual solipsism, offering critique without commitment. Foucault, too, questioned Derrida's authority in conducting an "archaeology of silence," accusing him of merely reinscribing the very logocentrism he purported to unseat.

Nevertheless, Derrida's interventions were transformative, not only for poststructuralist theory but also for literary criticism, legal studies, and philosophy. He problematised the structuralist pursuit of fixed meaning, replacing it with a method of close

reading that uncovers the irreducible multiplicity of signification—a move that remains a cornerstone of poststructuralist critique.

4.4.4 Julia Kristeva: Intertextuality and Subjectivity

Julia Kristeva, a central figure in the Tel Quel group and a key proponent of French poststructuralism, coined the term *intertextualité* in the late 1960s to describe the relational nature of texts. Drawing on and extending Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, Kristeva argued that “any text is a mosaic of quotations” and that it absorbs and transforms other texts (Kristeva, 1967, cited by Qin, 2004). Meaning is no longer self-contained within a work but dispersed across a textual network. In doing so, Kristeva undermined the structuralist ideal of the autonomous, self-sufficient text.

Intertextuality foregrounds the instability of signification by locating texts in a dynamic field of interrelation and re-citation. The reading process, therefore, is an act of tracing—not discovering—meaning. Kristeva’s theory was first articulated in essays such as *Word, Dialogue, and Novel* and *The Bounded Text*, and later developed within psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks.

Beyond textuality, Kristeva also interrogated the construction of subjectivity. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she introduced the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic refers to pre-linguistic drives and rhythms, while the symbolic denotes structured language. The subject, in her view, is constituted through the constant tension and oscillation between these two poles (Han, 2020). Crucially, the semiotic disrupts and resists the symbolic order, mirroring how intertextuality destabilises structuralist coherence.

Kristeva’s work thus synthesises poststructuralist concerns with meaning, language, and subjectivity, while also opening the door to feminist psychoanalytic critiques. Her emphasis on multiplicity, fragmentation, and the embodied subject stands in stark contrast to structuralist abstraction and formalism.

4.5 Theoretical Tensions and Critiques

At the heart of the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism lies a profound theoretical tension regarding the nature of meaning, subjectivity, and interpretation. Structuralism assumes that cultural phenomena can be understood through systems of underlying rules, where meaning is fixed and hierarchical. The structure itself is treated as the stable locus from which sense is derived. Poststructuralism, in contrast, dissolves such fixity, viewing meaning as fluid, deferred, and inherently unstable (Han, 2020).

One of the most pronounced tensions is epistemological. Structuralism aspires to scientificity, aspiring to emulate the systematicity of linguistics or mathematics in its analyses. This is especially visible in Lévi-Strauss's work, where the ambition is to discover universal laws governing human culture. Poststructuralists such as Derrida and Foucault reject such aspirations, insisting that knowledge is always mediated by power, discourse, and historical contingency (Chaffee & Lemert, 2008).

The issue of the subject is another key dividing line. While structuralism marginalises the human subject—treating it as an effect of structures—poststructuralism goes further by interrogating the very coherence of the subject itself. Foucault and Kristeva, in particular, argue that subjectivity is not foundational but discursively produced, fragmented, and constantly in flux.

Additionally, structuralism privileges synchronic analysis—studying systems at a given moment—whereas poststructuralism reintroduces diachrony, historicity, and process. The result is a shift from totalising explanations to an emphasis on difference, multiplicity, and critique. Structuralism posits order; poststructuralism revels in disorder—but as a productive and revealing terrain.

Structuralism has faced substantial criticism for its perceived reductionism and detachment from lived experience. Critics have accused it of overemphasising abstract systems at the expense of historical, political, and subjective dimensions (Runciman, 1969). Its ambition to model cultural life on linguistic principles has also been faulted for neglecting material and affective aspects of culture. Furthermore, structuralism's affinity for binary oppositions (e.g., nature/culture, male/female, mind/body) has been critiqued for replicating Western metaphysical hierarchies.

Poststructuralism, for its part, has been criticised for its perceived nihilism and obscurity. Its insistence on textual indeterminacy and its rejection of stable meanings have led to accusations of relativism and anti-humanism (Han, 2020). Scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Manfred Frank have charged poststructuralism with undermining the possibility of coherent political critique or ethical grounding. Moreover, the dense, often elliptical prose of figures like Derrida and Kristeva has been labelled inaccessible and elitist.

Despite these critiques, both paradigms have left indelible marks on the humanities and social sciences. Structuralist methods continue to inform semiotics, narratology, and comparative mythology. Poststructuralism, meanwhile, has energised fields such as cultural studies, queer theory, decolonial thought, and critical discourse analysis. Thinkers such as Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak have extended poststructuralist ideas into new political terrains, demonstrating their enduring relevance.

4.6 Semiotic dimensions of analysis

Within semiotics, the analysis of signs and meaning-making is fundamentally structured by key linguistic and rhetorical frameworks, among which syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, metaphor and metonymy, and the broader domain of rhetoric are pivotal. These frameworks not only provide analytical tools but also reveal the epistemological depth of semiotics as a discipline rooted in structuralist thought.

Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations is foundational to structuralist semiotics. Syntagmatic structures concern the horizontal combination of signs, such as the sequence of words in a sentence, whereas paradigmatic structures operate on a vertical axis of substitution, denoting choices among signs that could occupy the same position (Chandler, 2022). These two axes represent not merely grammatical relations but are essential to understanding how meaning is constructed relationally. The syntagm is governed by combination (e.g., 'the man cried'), while the paradigm is driven by selection (e.g., substituting 'cried' with 'died' or 'sang'). This dichotomy is instrumental in all semiotic codes, enabling interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal systems.

The analytic utility of these structures extends beyond linguistics. For instance, Barthes (1967) applied syntagmatic and paradigmatic logic to fashion: a complete outfit

(syntagm) is composed by selecting items (paradigm) from categories such as tops, bottoms, and footwear. This structural logic also operates in visual culture, cuisine, and social performance, illustrating its transdisciplinary applicability (Culler, 2007; Chandler, 2022).

Parallel to these structural axes are rhetorical figures that play a significant role in meaning production, particularly metaphor and metonymy, first elaborated by Roman Jakobson. Metaphor operates along the paradigmatic axis—substituting one concept for another based on similarity—while metonymy follows the syntagmatic axis, relying on contiguity or association (Jakobson & Halle, 1956 cited by Koch, 1999). This differentiation, while linguistic in origin, also reflects broader cultural codes. Metonymy, for example, tends to dominate realist texts due to its causal logic, while metaphor is more prevalent in poetic or surrealist discourse.

Jakobson's insights were later adopted by psychoanalytic and cultural theorists such as Lacan and Barthes, who linked metaphor to Freud's condensation and metonymy to displacement, highlighting the unconscious dimensions of semiotic processes (Lacan, 1977; White, 1978). Despite their heuristic value, these tropes are not without theoretical ambiguity. Metaphor requires an imaginative leap, often risking opacity; metonymy, while seemingly grounded in experience, may obscure the constructed nature of associations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 cited by Koch, 1999). Thus, while both are essential to semiotic inquiry, their deployment requires critical awareness of their epistemological consequences.

Rhetoric more broadly encompasses these tropes and underscores semiotics' concern with the persuasive dimensions of discourse. Based on Chandler (2022), all communication is inherently rhetorical, not merely in style but in epistemological orientation. Rhetoric shapes the construction of knowledge, blurring the lines between 'neutral' description and interpretive framing. The so-called "rhetorical turn" in the humanities recognises this shift from objectivism to discourse-centred epistemologies.

Moreover, rhetorical tropes such as synecdoche—often treated as a subcategory of metonymy—reveal the ideological underpinnings of signs. The substitution of part for whole (e.g., 'hands' for workers) illustrates how language condenses complex realities into digestible signs, often serving hegemonic purposes (Lanham, 1991). As such, attention to rhetoric enables the semiotician not only to decode meaning but also to critique the cultural assumptions embedded within sign systems.

In sum, syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, alongside rhetorical tools such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, form a critical arsenal for semiotic analysis. They provide both a technical vocabulary for structural description and a conceptual framework for ideological critique. While indispensable, these tools are not immune to limitations: their reliance on binary logic and formal abstraction may obscure contextual nuance and historical contingency. Nonetheless, as Chandler (2022) affirms, they remain vital to any serious interrogation of how meaning is produced, circulated, and contested within culture.

5. Semiotics in Sport Communication and Advertising

5.1 Introduction

Semiotics plays a critical role in media and communication, particularly in advertising, sports media, and Olympic marketing communication. As a discipline, semiotics examines how meanings are constructed through images, texts, and cultural codes, influencing public perception and consumer behaviour (Barthes, 1977).

This section of literature review critically analyses recent academic sources, categorising them into three major areas: semiotics in advertising, semiotics in sports media, and semiotics in Olympic marketing communication. In recent years, scholars have explored how semiotics informs brand identity, media representation of gender and nationality, and the symbolic function of Olympic mascots and ceremonies. By evaluating the methodologies, findings, and limitations of existing research, this review identifies key themes and gaps in the field, providing a foundation for further study.

5.3 Semiotic Analysis in Advertising

Advertising heavily relies on semiotics to shape brand identity and consumer engagement. According to Chandler (2022), advertising functions as a semiotic system, where signs convey cultural values, emotions, and social identities. Studies have shown that brands strategically use colours, typography, and visual metaphors to construct desirable brand images (Danesi, 2017). For example, a study by Manik et al. (2022) examines billboard advertising and demonstrates that culturally familiar signs enhance audience reception. Similarly, Damayanti et al. (2021) analyse Mentos advertisements, highlighting how humour and playful semiotics create a memorable brand identity. However, these studies primarily focus on visual elements, with limited discussion on consumer interpretation and interaction.

Several studies address the role of gendered semiotics in advertising. Feminist scholars argue that advertisements often reinforce hegemonic gender norms, portraying women as passive, aesthetic objects, while men are associated with power and dominance (Goffman, 1979). For instance, a study on Japanese beauty advertisements (Andini et al., 2022) applies Peircean semiotic analysis, demonstrating how idealised femininity is constructed through light skin tones, delicate body language, and submissive expressions. In contrast, Susanto (2024) explores the semiotics of masculinity in perfume advertising, showing that male figures are frequently positioned as dominant and assertive. Although

these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the agency of consumers in interpreting gendered messages. Future research should explore how diverse audiences negotiate and resist these semiotic constructions.

With the rise of global advertising, scholars have investigated cross-cultural semiotics. Various studies have explored cross-cultural communication in advertising across diverse regions. For instance, Oyama (2000) analyses visual semiotics in Japanese and British advertisements, shedding light on cultural differences in visual communication strategies. Oputa and bin Ahmad (2019) compare semiotic approaches employed by international smartphone brands in China, South Korea, and the United States, highlighting how global firms tailor their advertising messages to resonate with local audiences. Similarly, Ullah et al. (2022) investigate the representation of cross-cultural elements in digital toothpaste advertisements, revealing how brands incorporate culturally specific signs to appeal to diverse consumer groups. Additionally, Nikolaeva (2015) examines Russian advertising, contributing to the understanding of how semiotic choices reflect cultural values and communication norms.

Research by Ho and Tanaka (2023) delves into how multinational corporations adjust their semiotic codes to different cultural contexts. Their study on Nissin's advertisement featuring Naomi Osaka demonstrates how racial identity is selectively emphasised or downplayed depending on the target market. This case study highlights that semiotic choices in advertising are not neutral but are strategically shaped by corporate interests and audience expectations. While these studies provide valuable insights, much of the existing literature primarily focuses on East-West comparisons. There remains a significant research gap in exploring semiotic adaptation within non-Western markets, particularly in regions where global brands must navigate complex cultural nuances beyond the conventional East-West binary.

These studies provide a crucial reference for this research, particularly in applying semiotic analysis to Olympic-related advertisements and audience perceptions. Insights on visual semiotics, gendered representations, and cross-cultural adaptations inform how brands use Olympic athletes to convey messages of excellence and national identity. Moreover, the limited focus on consumer interpretation highlights the need to examine how audiences engage with these ads. This research builds on existing frameworks to explore the semiotic strategies in Olympic advertising and their reception across different cultural contexts.

5.3 Semiotics in Sports Media

The application of semiotics in sports media has been widely explored in academic research, particularly in relation to the construction of identity, gender, nationalism, and commercial branding. Sports media, including advertising, photography, and branding, employs signs and symbols to create meaning, shape public perception, and reinforce dominant ideologies (Bishop, 2001; Gee, 2009). Sports media often employs semiotic storytelling to construct aspirational narratives, and sports advertising relies on nationalistic and heroic symbolism to promote athletes and brands (Silk & Andrews, 2001; Rowe et al., 2002; Goodman et al., 2002). This section reviews recent studies on the semiotic analysis of sports media, focusing on themes of myth-making, gender representation, national identity, and commercial branding.

Sports media often constructs myths that shape public perceptions of athletes and teams. Gee (2009) examines how the National Hockey League's Inside the Warrior campaign reinforces a hyper-masculine sports myth, portraying hockey players as warriors in a battle for dominance. This aligns with Barthes' (1972) concept of myth as a secondary level of signification, where cultural values are naturalised through media representation. Goodman et al. (2002) explore the portrayal of Olympic athletes in advertising, demonstrating how gendered heroism follows traditional archetypes, with male athletes depicted as warriors and female athletes as skilled yet less combative figures. Similarly, Ogden (2007) investigates how Major League Baseball (MLB) maintains its nationalistic mythology through semiotic storytelling. He illustrates how baseball is framed as a uniquely American tradition, reinforcing national identity and moral purity. However, a limitation of this study is it lacks an audience perspective, assuming that these myths are passively accepted rather than contested.

Gendered representations in sports media remain an important area of semiotic analysis. Mishra (2014) investigates figure skating photography from the Torino Winter Olympics, revealing how female athletes are often feminised and sexualised, while male athletes are associated with power and dominance. The study highlights the interplay of masculinity and femininity in shaping public perceptions of athleticism. Similarly, Ho and Tanaka (2023) analyse how Naomi Osaka's racial and gender identity is constructed in Japanese advertising, demonstrating how corporate media selectively emphasises or

minimises racial characteristics based on audience expectations. These findings align with broader feminist critiques of sports media, which argue that semiotic representations reinforce hegemonic gender norms (Goodman et al., 2002).

Semiotic studies of sports media also explore how national identity is constructed and communicated. Park and Shin (2022) examine South Korean media representations of Coach Sarah Murray, revealing how gender, nationalism, and whiteness intersect in sports discourse. Their study shows how Murray's foreign identity was framed within narratives of global hierarchy, reinforcing the dominance of North American coaching expertise. Similarly, Seliverstova et al. (2022) analyse the cinematic representation of Soviet sports in Russian media, illustrating how historical myths of Soviet athletic superiority are perpetuated through contemporary media texts. These studies demonstrate that national identity in sports media is a constructed semiotic process, often serving political and ideological functions.

The commercialisation of sports relies heavily on semiotics, particularly in branding and logo design. Bishop (2001) explores how professional sports logos have evolved from symbols of team loyalty to commercially driven brand identities. His analysis demonstrates how sports branding functions as a system of signs that influence consumer behaviour and create a spectacle of fandom. Karlsson et al. (2023) extend this discussion to youth sports, examining how commercial branding constructs immaterial values such as happiness and individualism. These studies highlight how semiotic analysis can uncover the ideological dimensions of sports marketing.

The semiotic analysis of sports media demonstrates how signs and symbols actively shape perceptions of athletes, gender roles, national identity, and commercial branding, rather than merely reflecting reality. While existing research provides valuable frameworks, it largely focuses on producer intentions, overlooking audience interpretations. Future studies should explore semiotic strategies in non-Western media contexts and employ reception analysis to examine how diverse audiences engage with and negotiate these representations. This study builds on these insights by analysing how Olympic advertising constructs myths of national pride, athletic heroism, and brand association, while also addressing the gap in understanding how audiences interpret or resist these narratives.

5.4 Semiotics in Olympic Marketing Communication

Semiotics is crucial in understanding how Olympic marketing constructs meanings and influences audience perceptions. The Olympic Games, as a global spectacle, serve as an ideal case for semiotic analysis, where signs, symbols, and narratives create brand identity, reinforce national representation, and engage consumers. Barthes (1993) noted that sports events transform athletes into mythic figures, symbolising national pride, heroism, and resilience. Olympic marketing communication employs semiotic strategies across various media, including mascots, ceremonies, and branding, to craft ideological and commercial messages. This section reviews key studies on Olympic marketing communication, focusing on semiotic representation in branding, national identity construction, and audience reception.

Olympic mascots play a vital role in branding, serving as visual representations of both the Games and the host nation. Griggs et al. (2016) examine the mascots of the 2012 London Olympics, highlighting the challenge of creating a character that resonates with global audiences while reinforcing local identity. The study finds that while mascots aim to symbolise national heritage and Olympic values, their reception is often mixed, with some designs criticised for being too abstract or alienating. Similarly, Knight et al. (2014) analyse Olympic mascots from 2006 to 2012, arguing that their effectiveness in communication is limited when they fail to clearly represent core Olympic symbols, such as the Olympic Rings and Flame.

Palladino et al. (2022) further investigate how mascot design influences audience attitudes and purchase intentions, focusing on the mascots of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Bing Dwen Dwen and Shuey Rhon Rhon. Their study suggests that well-designed mascots enhance emotional attachment to the Games and drive merchandise sales. However, a limitation of these studies is their emphasis on the design process rather than audience reception, leaving gaps in understanding how consumers from different cultural backgrounds interpret these symbols. Ding (2022) explores how Bing Dwen Dwen was transformed into an internet meme, illustrating how youth subcultures reappropriate Olympic symbols for online socialisation and entertainment. This study highlights the dynamic nature of semiotic meaning, which extends beyond official branding efforts and into participatory culture (Ding, 2022).

Moreover, Olympic ceremonies can be seen as powerful semiotic displays that reinforce national identity and ideological narratives. Wang et al. (2024) examine the 2022

Beijing Winter Olympics, illustrating how multimodal discourse was strategically used to present China as a modern, technologically advanced nation. Similarly, Jiang et al. (2024) analyse how the Hangzhou Asian Games incorporated cultural symbols in its opening and closing ceremonies to enhance China's global image. These studies reveal how national identity is constructed through a blend of historical references, symbolic gestures, and carefully curated visual and linguistic elements. Li (2022) investigates the symbolic mechanisms in sports event ceremonies, arguing that these events play a crucial role in fostering national identity by evoking collective memory and emotional attachment to national symbols. This aligns with the findings of Xiao and Sriruksa (2024), who explores how mythological narratives in Olympic media representations influence perceptions of national power and cultural identity. However, both studies primarily focus on the producer's perspective, leaving gaps in understanding how international audiences interpret these nationalistic representations.

The Olympics often become a battleground for political symbolism. Choi and Park (2023) investigate the controversy surrounding the display of Japan's Rising Sun Flag at the Tokyo Olympics, revealing how historical symbols can provoke political tensions. Their study underscores the power of semiotic signs in shaping collective memory and geopolitical narratives. Similarly, Qian (2025) explores cultural intertextuality in Olympic media discourse, demonstrating how different cultures negotiate meaning in Olympic-themed publicity. While these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on political conflicts rather than commercial branding. This research builds on their findings by examining how brands navigate political sensitivities in Olympic marketing and how audiences respond to these semiotic strategies.

In addition, Olympic marketing often employs multimodal strategies, combining text, imagery, and metaphor to construct compelling narratives. Tseng (2024) analyses how multimodal metaphors were used in pandemic-related Olympic communication, demonstrating how semiotic flows create layered meanings. This approach is particularly relevant to Olympic advertising, where brands use visual and linguistic elements to evoke emotions and establish connections with audiences.

While existing research has extensively examined mascots, ceremonies, and political symbols, audience reception remains an underexplored area. Most studies focus on official representations, neglecting how consumers interact with and interpret these symbols in

various cultural contexts. Additionally, Olympic branding research often centres on Western perspectives, with limited focus on non-Western interpretations of Olympic marketing semiotics. This study builds on previous findings by investigating how consumers engage with Olympic advertising and how brands navigate cultural and political sensitivities in their semiotic strategies.

5.5 Semiotics and Ideology

Semiotics is fundamental to the construction and preservation of ideology, as it governs how meanings are generated, disseminated, and understood within society. The relationship between semiotics and ideology is grounded in the idea that meaning is never neutral but always embedded within social structures and power dynamics (Threadgold, 1986). Keane (2018) defines semiotic ideology as the underlying assumptions individuals and societies hold about signs, their functions, and their effects. These assumptions vary across historical and cultural contexts, shaping how meaning is constructed and legitimised. Unlike traditional views that see ideology as a system imposed from above, Threadgold (1986) argues that ideology operates through everyday discourse, embedding itself in routine communication and social practices. This aligns with the perspective in Sebeok et al. (1988), which explores how ideological systems function within semiotic structures, influencing how individuals perceive reality and engage with symbolic representation.

Semiotic ideology also governs what is considered a valid sign and how it should be interpreted. For example, different cultures may attribute contrasting meanings to the same symbol, leading to contested signification (Keane, 2018). Such ideological tensions are evident in political and religious conflicts, where disputes often revolve around the legitimacy and interpretation of symbols rather than their inherent meaning. Furthermore, ideology is not static but is actively reproduced and challenged through semiotic practices (Threadgold, 1986).

One of the key debates in semiotics and ideology concerns whether ideology functions as a coherent system imposed from above or as a more dispersed set of meanings operating through everyday discourse. Traditional Marxist perspectives, such as those of Althusser (1971 cited by McLennan et al., 2013), framed ideology as a tool of domination, maintained by the ruling class through Ideological State Apparatuses. However, semiotic approaches suggest that ideology is not merely imposed but is also co-produced by

individuals through discourse and cultural practices (Voloshinov, 1930). This perspective challenges the notion of ideology as a fixed entity and instead positions it as an ongoing struggle over meaning, where signs become sites of contestation and negotiation.

Barthes (1973) introduced the idea that ideology operates through connotative semiotics, whereby dominant social values are naturalised through language and imagery. However, this approach has been critiqued for its monologic representation of ideology, which assumes that media and language primarily serve to reproduce hegemonic meanings without space for resistance or alternative interpretations (Gramsci, 1971 cited by Brandist, 1996). In contrast, Bakhtin and Voloshinov (1930 cited by Brandist, 1996) highlights the polyphonic nature of discourse, suggesting that semiotic signs are always open to multiple interpretations and ideological struggles.

A crucial development in semiotic ideology has been the study of how different cultural and historical contexts shape the interpretation of signs. Keane (2018) argues that semiotic ideology refers to the underlying assumptions societies hold about how signs function and the effects they produce. These assumptions influence how meaning is legitimised, shaping perceptions of reality across different social environments. Similarly, Foucault (1972) contends that ideology is deeply intertwined with discourse, as systems of knowledge and belief are constructed and maintained through language. This view positions semiotic analysis as essential for understanding how power operates through symbolic representation.

This research examines two key ideological dimensions in semiotic analysis: nationalist ideology and gender ideology. Nationalist ideology, expressed through symbols like flags, historical narratives, and public rituals, reinforces national identity and a sense of collective belonging. Meanwhile, gender ideology shapes perceptions of masculinity and femininity, sustaining hegemonic norms in media and public discourse. Both ideologies influence societal understandings of power and identity, making them central to semiotic inquiry. The following sections will review the literature on nationalist ideology and gender ideology in semiotics.

5.5.1 Nationalist Ideology in Semiotics

5.5.1.1 *National Identity and Banal Nationalism*

In his seminal 1983 work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nations are "imagined political communities"—social constructs rather than natural entities. A nation exists because its members, despite never meeting in person, share a collective identity and a sense of belonging, fostered through symbols, narratives, and cultural representations. It provides a foundational understanding of nationalism, emphasising that national identity is not grounded in direct interaction but rather mediated through shared symbols, language, and cultural narratives, which are disseminated via media, politics, and everyday practices. Bairner and Han (2022) expand upon Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities by demonstrating how sports act as a practical site for the reproduction of national identity through shared symbols, ceremonies, and collective experiences (Bairner & Han, 2022).

Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism suggests that nationalism is not always overtly political but is instead deeply embedded in mundane, everyday practices. He argues that routine semiotic cues, such as national flags in public spaces, the linguistic framing of national identity in the media, and the habitual presence of national symbols, sustain national consciousness. These everyday reinforcements normalise national identity, making it an unconscious part of daily life rather than an explicitly political ideology. Knott (2015) extends this discussion, highlighting how everyday objects—such as banknotes, street names, and televised ceremonies—reinforce national identity through habitual exposure. Bonikowski (2016) argues that national identity is sustained through repetitive interactions with national symbols, rather than explicit political rhetoric. According to Bairner and Han (2022), the everyday visibility of national symbols in sports shows from flags at stadiums to national anthems during ceremonies (Bairner & Han, 2022). However, Skey (2009) critiques Billig's thesis, contending that globalisation and migration have made national identity more fluid, challenging traditional notions of a fixed, stable national consciousness.

The rise of digital nationalism has further transformed how nationalist sentiments are expressed, disseminated, and reinforced. Hasanah et al. (2019) examine interactive discourse on digital platforms, demonstrating how linguistic signs, memes, and semiotic markers in online debates construct and reinforce national identity. Their findings suggest that the digital sphere intensifies nationalism by shaping in-group and out-group distinctions, often polarising ideological positions. Similarly, Mylonas and Tudor (2021) argue that hashtags,

digital flags, and internet memes now function as modern semiotic devices, adapting traditional nationalist symbolism for the online environment. These digital representations not only replicate historical nationalist symbols but also amplify nationalist discourse, particularly in moments of political or sporting tension.

Nationalist sentiment is frequently expressed and reinforced through sports, where flags, anthems, and team colours serve as powerful semiotic markers of national identity. Yoedtadi and Sandy (2021) apply Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to football photography, showing that images of athletes saluting the flag or singing the national anthem evoke deeply ingrained connotations of patriotism and unity. Similarly, Reichl (2004) examines the semiotics of the national flag, demonstrating how such symbols serve dual functions—uniting people within a shared identity while simultaneously defining the boundaries between “us” and “them.” This reinforces a sense of national distinction and, at times, exclusionary tendencies. In addition, Olympic success often serves as a powerful semiotic marker of national pride, reinforcing national identity through media representations and collective rituals. A cross-national study by Billings et al. (2015) demonstrates that citizens in countries with higher Olympic medal counts tend to report stronger feelings of national pride, highlighting the routine and often subtle mechanisms by which nationalism is reproduced during mega-sporting events. However, the emphasis on national unity within such representations may obscure the commercial and exclusionary dimensions of sport, where the commodification of national identity can marginalise dissenting voices or non-mainstream identities.

Beyond sports, cinema and food culture also act as potent semiotic tools for nationalism. Arahmad and Wirawanda (2021) explore how the Indonesian war film *Kadet 1947* employs visual and auditory symbolism, such as military uniforms, patriotic speeches, and historical imagery, to construct a heroic national past. Similarly, Ichijo (2020) examines gastrationalism, the use of food as a cultural marker of national identity. Dishes like Japanese Washoku and French foie gras function not merely as cuisine but as symbolic representations of national heritage, distinguishing one country from another in both cultural and political discourse.

5.5.1.2 Nationalism in sport media and advertising

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a theoretical framework for decoding the communication of nationalist ideology. The works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Roland Barthes provide key insights into how national symbols operate within media and advertising. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), nationalist identity can be constructed through signifiers (e.g., flags, anthems) that acquire meaning through cultural association. According to Charles Peirce (1931): Icons, indexes, and symbols can help explain the effectiveness of national symbols. Based on Roland Barthes (1957), nationalist discourse relies on myths, where historical narratives and cultural symbols are naturalised into ideology. Building on these theoretical foundations, this study employs semiotic analysis to examine how nationalist ideology is embedded in Olympic advertisements and interviews, focusing on the role of symbols, myths, and cultural associations. Therefore, it is essential in this research to review previous literatures on how the Olympics and Olympic sponsors construct and reinforce national identity through visual and linguistic cues in Olympic advertising, media discourse, and everyday practice.

The media serves as a powerful mechanism for encoding and disseminating nationalist ideology, shaping public perceptions of national identity. Sport has become increasingly embedded in the mediated matrix of national life, with the mass broadcasting of sporting events serving to naturalize and reproduce nationalist myths (Bairner & Han, 2022). According to Schiff (2001), nationalism should not be viewed as a homogeneous ideology but rather as a complex interplay of historical, political, and cultural narratives that foster a shared sense of belonging. Within this context, Olympic sports events act as 'media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992 cited by Billings et al., 2015), functioning as communal rituals that bring large audiences together through live broadcasts and collective experiences, thus fostering emotional communities centred around national pride and identity. Also, the Olympics have become an important platform for advertising campaigns strategically to deploy semiotic elements to evoke national pride and solidarity through symbolic nationalistic expression.

Advertisements frequently employ prominent national signifiers such as flags and national colours to establish immediate emotional connections, while athletes are often portrayed as embodiments of national excellence, symbolising collective identity and aspirations. Historical references to past Olympic victories are incorporated to evoke nostalgia and to reinforce narratives of enduring national success. For instance, Coca-Cola's

Olympic advertising has repeatedly featured athletes in national uniforms, waving flags, or emotionally responding to national anthems, creating visual and auditory signifiers that reinforce nationalist sentiment (Wedekind, 2008; Coburn & McCafferty, 2016). In this way, myth operates as a third level of signification, implicitly embedding nationalist messages within seemingly neutral symbols. This mythologisation of national identity reinforces binary oppositions between the national self and the foreign "other."

Some advertisements construct narratives that naturalise nationalism by framing athletic performances as national achievements. Common tropes include the underdog narrative, where smaller nations or individual athletes are portrayed as overcoming adversity, symbolising national resilience. Menzies (2021) discusses how the underdog trope plays a central role in Australian nationalism, reinforcing collective ideals of struggle and perseverance. Similarly, victories are framed not merely as individual successes but as triumphs reflective of the national spirit, and images of diverse citizens celebrating together are employed to project a sense of national unity. For example, brands such as Nike have frequently highlighted athletes from various backgrounds, presenting their personal struggles as metaphors for national endurance.

Beyond advertising, the discourse constructed through athlete and coach interviews in Olympic media coverage further contributes to the semiotic construction of nationalism. Athletes frequently emphasise that they are competing for their country rather than for individual recognition, thereby foregrounding the theme of national representation. Victories are often mythologised, attributed to perceived national character traits, such as "Japanese perseverance" or "American determination." Additionally, journalists frequently juxtapose the performances of athletes from different countries, reinforcing a sense of national rivalry (Whigham, 2014). Interviews with gold medallists, in particular, tend to highlight narratives that position national identity as central to individual success, contributing further to the subtle yet powerful reinforcement of nationalism through mediated sporting discourse.

5.5.1.3 Nationalist propaganda

Nationalist propaganda heavily manipulates semiotic elements to construct and sustain ideological narratives. Bolin and Miazhevich (2018) investigate how commercialised nationalist symbols, such as branding campaigns and sports sponsorships, contribute to the reinforcement of nationalist ideologies. Similarly, Arning (2013) analyses Olympic opening

ceremonies, arguing that these events are carefully choreographed performances of national identity. By using visual storytelling, historical references, and curated imagery, nations project themselves onto the global stage, crafting narratives of continuity, progress, and unity. However, Arning also critiques these representations for selectively omitting inconvenient historical truths, prioritising national spectacle over historical accuracy.

While semiotics is often employed to reinforce nationalist ideology, it can also serve as a space for contestation and resistance. Voloshinov (1930) introduced the concept of multi-acculturality, which suggests that signs are not fixed in meaning but subject to reinterpretation. This is particularly relevant in political resistance movements, where activists repurpose and re-signify nationalist symbols to challenge dominant ideologies. Schiff (2001) examines how political activists use national flags in protests, subverting their conventional meanings to expose ideological contradictions within nationalist discourse. Similarly, the debate over the Rising Sun Flag in the Tokyo Olympics (Choi & Park, 2023) illustrates how historical symbols can provoke political controversy, demonstrating that nationalistic imagery is subject to competing interpretations based on historical memory and geopolitical tensions.

In addition, nationalist symbols are frequently instrumentalised by political elites to justify exclusionary policies and cultivate populist support. Schnee (2001) critiques the manipulation of nationalism by authoritarian regimes, arguing that national symbols often become tools for political control, fostering a sense of us vs. them to strengthen state power. Mylonas and Tudor (2021) highlight how populist leaders deploy “constitutive stories”—narratives that define who belongs to the nation and who does not—to frame national identity in opposition to globalisation, migration, and multiculturalism. These semiotic battlegrounds demonstrate that the meaning of nationalism is constantly contested, shifting according to political, social, and historical contexts.

5.5.2 Gender Ideologies in Semiotics

5.5.2.1 Gender ideologies

Gender ideologies, as defined in feminist and sociolinguistic scholarship, refer to culturally embedded beliefs about masculinity and femininity that shape power relations and social expectations (Ehrlich, 2014). These ideologies permeate societal norms, roles, and identities, influencing how gender is represented, performed, and reinforced. The intersection

of semiotics and gender ideology provides an analytical framework to examine how language, media, and cultural texts reinforce traditional gender roles or challenge hegemonic structures.

This section explores how semiotics informs the study of gender ideologies, focusing on media representation, advertising, discourse, and political narratives. Drawing upon key works such as *The Semiotic Web 1987* (Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok, 2010) and *Hegemonic Masculinity* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), this review outlines critical theoretical debates and provides a semiotic perspective on the ideological function of gendered signs.

Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) argues that gender is not biologically determined but is instead a socially constructed performance. Butler challenges the notion of fixed gender identities, asserting that gender is a fluid and contested process, shaped by societal norms, cultural representations, and discourse. From a semiotic perspective, gender functions as a system of signs, where visual and linguistic markers define and reinforce masculinity and femininity.

Media, language, and symbolic imagery serve as powerful mechanisms in the encoding and reproduction of gender norms. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity is upheld through semiotic codes that associate masculinity with dominance, rationality, and aggression, while femininity is often represented as passive, nurturing, and subordinate. Advertising, for instance, frequently portrays men as authoritative figures and women in subservient roles, reinforcing binary gender distinctions. Similarly, Lazar (2000) examines parenting discourse, demonstrating how visual and linguistic representations of motherhood depict women as primary caregivers, reinforcing patriarchal narratives of gendered labour.

5.5.2.2 Media and Advertising as Gendered Sign Systems

Discourse plays an essential role in sustaining gender ideologies. Discourse does not merely reflect gender norms but actively produces them through repetition and reinforcement. This aligns with Althusser's notion of interpellation, where individuals internalise gender identities through ideological state apparatuses such as media, education, and advertising (Correa, 2022). This process is deeply embedded within social and institutional structures, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and traditional femininity. Through the repetition of gendered signs in media, advertising, and cultural narratives, these norms are normalised,

internalised, and perpetuated, further entrenching the binary distinctions that structure gender ideology.

Mass media, particularly television and advertising, serves as a semiotic system that constructs and sustains gender ideologies. Advertising, in particular, uses gendered signs to communicate cultural norms. Studies on gender representation in advertisements have shown that women are frequently depicted in passive, nurturing, or domestic roles, while men are associated with authority, dominance, and rationality (Bezuidenhout, 1998 cited by Correa, D, 2009).

A semiotic analysis of television advertisements for hygiene products found that the portrayal of women reinforces traditional gender roles, presenting femininity as inherently linked to cleanliness, beauty, and domesticity (Correa, 2022). Similarly, Robertson and Davidson (2013) argue that advertisements do not merely sell products but also shape social consciousness by embedding dominant gender ideologies within cultural narratives. This is evident in perfume advertisements, where women are often sexualised objects of desire, reinforcing the male gaze as a semiotic construct. Clothing brands, on the other hand, frequently market men's apparel through narratives of strength and success, reinforcing cultural expectations of masculinity.

However, gendered media representations are not static. Contemporary feminist advertising campaigns have attempted to challenge traditional representations by incorporating themes of female empowerment. Yet, some scholars argue that such campaigns often commodify feminism rather than fundamentally disrupting patriarchal ideologies (Ehrlich, 2014).

In addition, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), is central to understanding how masculinity is semiotically constructed as dominant over femininity. Hegemonic masculinity operates through signs that signify authority, strength, and rationality, often depicted in politics, sports, and corporate leadership.

A key example of semiotic masculinity is the use of military imagery in advertising and political discourse. The visual language of power—such as rigid postures, deep vocal tones, and military uniforms—reinforces masculinity as a signifier of control and order (Foucault, 1980). However, alternative masculinities exist but are often subordinated in dominant discourse. For instance, media representations of non-heteronormative masculinity

are frequently marginalised or ridiculed, reinforcing hegemonic gender norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

5.5.2.3 Discourse, Politics, and Digital Feminist Resistance

Language, as a semiotic system, encodes gendered power relations through syntactic structures, metaphors, and speech patterns. Philips (2014) examines how patriarchal language norms marginalise women in political and corporate environments, positioning them as less authoritative speakers. Studies on workplace communication reveal that women's contributions are frequently interrupted or downplayed, illustrating how gender ideologies shape professional discourse.

Beyond workplace settings, political rhetoric and nationalist discourse reinforce gender hierarchies. Research on gender and political campaigns suggests that female politicians are often described in terms of their appearance, emotions, and familial roles, while male politicians are framed as strong, decisive leaders (Ehrlich, 2014). Ottoh-Agede and Essien-Eyo (2014) argue that nationalist discourse often reduces women's roles to cultural symbols, portraying them as preservers of tradition rather than active political agents.

Feminist theorists have extended this analysis to gender, arguing that media and literature perpetuate myths of femininity and masculinity that sustain patriarchal norms. The rise of digital feminism has further disrupted traditional gender representations. Social media platforms serve as arenas for the construction and contestation of gender identities. Hashtags, memes, and viral campaigns function as semiotic devices that influence public discourse on gender. Peng (2022) argues that digital nationalism has adapted traditional gender symbols to online spaces, reinforcing gender binaries through algorithm-driven content curation. However, feminist activism has leveraged digital semiotics to challenge gender stereotypes, using visual storytelling and social media campaigns to promote gender inclusivity. Despite these advancements, digital spaces continue to replicate offline power dynamics, marginalising women, particularly in political and professional discussions. Although digital feminism leverages semiotic resources to challenge traditional gender roles, some scholars question whether such interventions genuinely subvert patriarchal structures or simply repackage empowerment as a neoliberal commodity (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In conclusion, the study of semiotics and gender ideologies provides a critical framework for understanding how language, media, and cultural symbols shape societal

perceptions of masculinity and femininity. While semiotic structures often reinforce traditional gender norms, they also offer opportunities for resistance and transformation. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender representation by analysing how semiotic mechanisms sustain or challenge hegemonic ideologies. By applying semiotic analysis to sports media, Olympic advertising, and related culture, this study enhances our understanding of how gender identities are constructed, contested, and redefined.

5.6 Conclusion

Semiotics provides a comprehensive framework for analysing how meaning is constructed and communicated through language, symbols, and media representations. From Saussure's structuralist model to Peirce's pragmatic approach and Barthes' concept of myth, semiotics has evolved into a multidisciplinary tool for studying the role of signs in shaping public perception. Its application in advertising, sports media, and Olympic marketing communication demonstrates how brands and organisations strategically employ symbols to construct narratives of identity, power, and affiliation. Additionally, its role in nationalist and gender ideologies highlights how semiotics functions as an instrument of both reinforcement and resistance within dominant ideological structures.

Despite its extensive application, research gaps remain. First, while semiotics has been widely applied in advertising and branding, there is limited exploration of its role in digital media ecosystems, particularly in algorithm-driven advertising and influencer marketing. Second, most existing studies focus on media content and the producers of symbols, with relatively little attention given to audience reception and interpretation. Understanding how diverse audiences decode and negotiate meaning in different cultural and ideological contexts remains an underexplored area. Third, the intersection of semiotics, nationalism, and globalisation requires further study, especially in cross-cultural branding and transnational media narratives. Addressing these gaps would provide a more nuanced understanding of how semiotics operates in an evolving digital and global landscape.

6. Methodology and Research Methods

6.1. Research Philosophy

6.1.1 Constructivism paradigm

Paradigms provide researchers with fundamental worldviews, shaping what counts as knowledge and how it should be acquired. Kuhn (1996, p. 10, cited by Orman, 2016) describes a paradigm as “universally recognised scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners.” Ontology, epistemology, and methodology serve as key dimensions distinguishing paradigmatic approaches. Ontology concerns the nature of reality, questioning whether it is objective and independent, or socially and subjectively constructed (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). Epistemology relates to the interaction between the knower and the known, while methodology addresses the procedures used to acquire and interpret knowledge (Benton & Craib, 2023; Yilmaz, 2013).

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, rooted in a relativist ontological position and employing hermeneutic dialecticism as its methodological principle (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). Constructivism, as outlined by Boyland (2019), maintains that knowledge and truth are not discovered but constructed through subjective interpretation, with reality perceived as multiple, dynamic, and locally situated. Within this view, individuals build meaning based on their experiences, filtered through their cultural, historical, and social contexts. Boyland further emphasises that under a constructivist ontology, there are no universally valid truths, only context-specific reconstructions influenced by the transactional relationship between researcher and participants, a position referred to as transactional epistemology.

In differentiating constructivism from social constructionism, Hruby (2001) argues that constructivism concerns primarily psychological processes of individual meaning-making, whereas social constructionism addresses the communal and discursive creation of knowledge at the societal level. Hruby identifies three developmental trajectories within social constructionism: the sociological tradition (emphasising the institutionalisation of reality), the postmodern tradition (drawing on discourse and power relations), and the emerging ‘new realisms’ which attempt to balance constructed knowledge with empirical constraints. This nuanced understanding reinforces the appropriateness of adopting a social constructivist stance in this study, while remaining critically aware of the broader theoretical debates.

Accordingly, this study embraces a relativist ontology, acknowledging that reality is not a singular, objective entity but a multiplicity of socially and culturally constructed realities. From this perspective, what is regarded as 'truth' varies according to the lived experiences, cultural frameworks, and discursive contexts of individuals and groups. Reality is thus seen as contingent, fluid, and negotiated rather than fixed or universal (Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Boyland, 2019).

A transactional subjectivist epistemology is adopted in the study. In this epistemology, knowledge is not passively observed but actively co-constructed through the dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants. Meaning emerges through the mutual engagement of both parties, shaped by their respective histories, values, and interpretive frameworks (Boyland, 2019). This approach demands reflexivity on the part of the researcher, recognising that the act of inquiry itself influences the phenomena being studied. Consequently, knowledge is viewed as context-dependent and inherently partial, reflecting the situated nature of human understanding rather than aspiring to detached objectivity (Guba and Lincoln, 2001).

Methodologically, the study draws upon hermeneutic dialecticism as articulated by Guba and Lincoln (2001), which integrates hermeneutic (interpretive) and dialectic (dialogic) processes. Through iterative focus group discussions and semiotic analysis, meanings are co-constructed between researcher and participants, revealing culturally embedded perceptions of Olympic sponsorship. In this approach, participant accounts are treated not as fixed representations, but as evolving constructions emerging through discourse and social interaction.

In sum, this paradigm aligns with the study's aim to understand consumer perceptions and advertising meaning from an insider perspective. By acknowledging the situatedness of knowledge, and utilising qualitative methods grounded in interpretivism and dialogue, the study upholds the principles of constructivist inquiry whilst maintaining critical awareness of the complexities involved in meaning generation. It further justifies the use of qualitative methods, particularly focus groups and semiotic interpretation, which enable the researcher to co-construct meaning with participants in a dialogical, situated manner.

6.1.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is an approach that is appropriate for research that aims to investigate complex phenomena in their natural settings and understand the subjective experiences of individuals. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Similarly, Morse (2003:833) cited by Kloppe (2008) points out that qualitative methodology is used when little is known about a topic, the research context is poorly understood, the boundaries of a domain are ill-defined, the phenomenon under investigation is not quantifiable, the nature of the problem is not clear, or the researcher suspects that the phenomenon needs to be re-examined. As can be seen, the qualitative approach focuses on the richness and depth of data, which is essential in exploring phenomena that are difficult to quantify or measure. Creswell (2014) explains that the process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.

This study adopts a qualitative research design. The characteristics of qualitative research can be used to explain why qualitative research methods are needed to achieve the research objectives of this study.

Firstly, qualitative research is a flexible and adaptable approach, which allows the researcher to be responsive to the unique characteristics of the research context (Silverman, 2016). This research topic is complex and multifaceted, involving various data sources and cases, and requires a flexible research design that can accommodate unpredictable findings and changes in research questions. The qualitative approach allows for iterative data collection and analysis, which can adapt to emerging themes and patterns in the data.

Secondly, qualitative research is an appropriate method for exploring phenomena that are difficult to measure or quantify, such as attitudes, perceptions, and emotions (Creswell, 2014). This study involves exploring the attitudes and experiences of individuals towards a particular phenomenon, such as consumers' attitudes towards Olympic sponsorship activities. Since this study asked for participants' thoughts and experiences, the qualitative approach is appropriate to explore these subjective experiences and can provide rich and detailed data that can enhance the understanding of the phenomenon.

Thirdly, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of context and the social and cultural factors that influence the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research topic and research questions may be influenced by cultural, social, or historical factors, which may not be captured through quantitative data collection methods. This research was conducted in the specific social context of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing and the pandemic and lockdown in China, and these contextual factors could be explored and understood more deeply through qualitative research methods.

Fourthly, qualitative research is appropriate for exploring the diversity of perspectives and experiences of different individuals or groups (Charmaz, 2014). When the research topic involves exploring the experiences of individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds or cultural groups, qualitative research can provide a platform for individuals to share their experiences and perspectives. In this study, different backgrounds and various personal experiences of participants influenced their thoughts of the same phenomenon and issues. Through focus group interviews, participants can share their stories and experiences, which can enhance our understanding of the phenomenon.

Fifthly, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's role in the research process (Finlay, 2002). In the research, the researcher needs to engage with individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds or cultural groups, requiring a high degree of reflexivity and sensitivity. The qualitative approach emphasizes the importance of the researcher's role in the research process, and can provide a platform for the researcher to reflect on their own biases and assumptions.

In conclusion, this study is qualitative. Qualitative research methods were suitable to be used in this study, including focus groups (of consumers), and textual (from social media accounts). Merriam (2009 cited by Kang and Stotlar, 2011) and Creswell (2014) present that qualitative researcher focused on individual meaning, attitudes and experiences, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the complex phenomena being investigated and develop rich and detailed data that can enhance the understanding of the research topic.

6.2. Case study

6.2.1 The case study approach

Case study research is a common approach for conducting qualitative research and will be applied in this research. Yin (1989, p. 23) cited by Kose et al. (2011) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. Creswell (2006, p.73) defines case study as a qualitative approach 'in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes.' Simply, these two definitions emphasises case study research involves the in-depth exploration of an issue through one or more cases within a bounded system. In addition, Harrison et al. (2017) point out when working on qualitative case studies, methods aimed at generating inductive reasoning and interpretation rather than testing hypothesis take priority. They also present cases are selected based on the research purpose and question, and for what they could reveal about the phenomenon or topic of interest, aiming to provide a rich holistic description that illuminates one's understanding of the phenomena.

Creswell (2006, p.74) distinguished the types of qualitative case studies by the size of the bounded cases and in terms of the intent of the case analysis, including the single instrumental case study, the collective or multiple case study, and the intrinsic case study. This study is a collective case study in which one issue or concern is selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. In a collective case study, the researcher might select for study several programs from several research sites or multiple programs within a single site (Creswell, 2006). The researcher of this study selected one certain issue for inclusion in the qualitative research and selected multiple representative cases to show different perspectives on that issue.

6.2.2 Selection of case

This research will employ a case study to analyse the marketing sponsorship of the sport-mega event based on brand equity and sport marketing perspectives. Therefore, this study involves in two types of cases which need to be selected. The first one is a case of the

sport-mega event, and the second is selecting the cases of commercial sponsors and sponsorship activities. The case study approach is useful to investigate contemporary phenomena within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear (Rowley, 2002). To select a sample for this study, researchers have chosen to use a judgemental sample which is a non-probably sampling method that allows for selecting the case suitable to answer our research questions and to show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event the researcher wants to portray (Creswell, 2006; Berndt, 2021).

Based on this method, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games was chosen as a case of an international sport-mega event, because it was the latest Olympic Game and also the most grand and most watched sports event in recent years. For the cases of sponsors, the researcher selected Olympic sponsors including Yili, Mengniu, Coca-Cola, Tsingtao Brewery, Yanjing Beer, Anta Sports, and Samsung, as well as Eileen Gu's related Olympic sponsorship and endorsement, and conducted research on these sponsorship cases and their marketing activities to varying degrees. The researcher selected these cases because they were characteristic and representative sponsors. They are all brands with a certain history and popularity, some are Chinese national brands, and some are international brands. Some of them come from different levels of sponsorship, and researchers can longitudinally compare the rights and sponsorship results between sponsors of different levels. Some of them are brands of the same type of products, which is conducive to horizontal research on their brand differentiation strategies and how consumers distinguish them in the same category.

The focus of the research is to explore the cooperation and competition of sponsors in the context of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, such as the competition between Yili and Mengniu (two China's dairy companies) in Olympic marketing, the cooperative relationship between Mengniu and Coca-Cola in Olympic co-sponsorship, the joint Olympic sponsorship and rights sharing of Tsingtao Brewery and Yanjing Beer, and Olympic sponsorship and ambush marketing around Eileen Gu. Sponsors' respective marketing activities as well as their competition and cooperation all have an impact on their brand equity based on consumer perceptions. These influences and causes are of great significance to their brand building and our research on sports sponsorship and branding, so they are worth studying.

6.2.3 Data of Source

In the case study, Yin (2003) recommended six types of information to collect: documents, archival records (documents and audio-visual materials), interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. In this study, the researcher collected data from multiple sources, including documents and audio-visual materials of sponsors' advertisements and focus groups of Olympic spectators and consumers. Based on Kose et al. (2011), researchers could use multiple methods for the purpose of "triangulation" of data from different sources since employing multiple data sources elicits increased reliability of data and stronger substantiation of constructs and propositions. It should also be noted all research was originally conducted in the native Chinese language. After the research was concluded, the results of each data collection were translated into English by the researcher. Finally, the English-language results were translated back into Chinese in order to confirm the meanings were not changed based on the original language.

6.3. Data Collection Method: Focus Group

6.3.1 Introduction to the focus group

Focus groups are a popular qualitative research method used to collect data and gain insights into people's experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. According to Mack et al. (2005), focus groups are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented. This method allows researchers to collect data from multiple perspectives and can be useful for exploring complex or sensitive topics.

Focus group method is suitable to collect data for this study. Punch (2014) suggests that focus groups can be used in a variety of research settings, including health, education, and social sciences. He also notes that focus groups can help researchers to identify patterns and themes in the data, as well as gain a better understanding of the social and cultural contexts that shape people's experiences. This research topic is in the setting of social sciences, and aims to gain in-depth understanding of how the social and cultural contexts influenced consumers' perspectives. In addition, Bryman (2016) points out that focus groups can be used to generate hypotheses and develop theories, through providing valuable insights into the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a particular group of people. Through focus group participants discussing their different experiences, attitudes, and feelings towards sponsors

and marketing activities, this study aims to explore and analyse in-depth how sponsorship activities affect sponsors' brand equity.

However, there are also potential limitations to using focus groups in qualitative research. Creswell (2014) notes that group dynamics can influence the data collected, as participants may feel pressure to conform to the views of the group or may be reluctant to share their true feelings or experiences in a group setting. Additionally, Punch (2014) notes that focus groups can be time-consuming and may require significant planning and preparation.

To address these limitations and improve the quality of the data collected, there are strategies for the researcher when conducting focus groups. For example, Kitzinger (1994) suggested that researchers establish clear ground rules for the discussion, provide opportunities for individual reflection and input, and ensure that the facilitator is sensitive to the needs and perspectives of all participants. Moreover, Punch (2014) recommends that researchers should also consider the composition of the focus group and ensure that participants are chosen in a way that reflects the diversity of the population being studied. Additionally, Bryman (2016) notes that researchers should be aware of potential biases in the data, and should take steps to ensure that the data collected is valid and reliable.

6.3.2 Focus group design

In order to investigate customers' thoughts of the Olympic sponsorship and Olympic official sponsors' brand equity, I conducted four separate focus groups with a total of 24 participants, six participants in each group. All focus groups were facilitated by researchers in an online meeting room and will last approximately 90 minutes. The audio of the focus groups will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. Data collection duration was from 21st March to 20th April in 2022.

The topic of the focus groups is about sponsorship of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. To be more specific, in the focus group #1 and focus group #2, the questions to discuss are around milk brands, beer brands and their Olympic sponsorship. The focus group #3 and focus group #4 discussed Anta, Eileen Gu and their Olympic sponsorship. According to Krueger and Casey (2002), when we identify potential questions, there are five types of questions, including Opening Question (round robin), introductory question,

transition questions, key questions, and ending questions. When designing the focus group questions, I will use open-ended questions, and avoid dichotomous questions. During the focus group process, the researchers provided a brief description of the goal of the interview, and respondents were asked to answer questions including but not limited to what Olympic sponsorship means, what their feeling of each selected Olympic sponsor is, what their attitudes to different kinds of sponsoring products are.

6.3.3 Participant sampling method

I conducted two purposive sampling methods in the research of focus groups. The first one is typical case sampling. The purpose of typical case sampling ‘is to describe and illustrate what is typical to those unfamiliar with the setting’, so typical cases are selected ‘with the cooperation of key informants’ to identify “average-like” cases’ (Suri, 2011). In this research, I sought users on social media who talked about the Beijing 2022 or who claimed to have been to sponsors’ online or offline marketing activities. I contacted and invited them online to participate in my focus group interviews. For those who would like to join, I had them fill out an application form with some survey questions. These survey questions helped me get an initial idea of the characteristics of my sample and from which I could screen volunteers who were eligible to participate in the focus group. From this, I randomly selected eligible people as participants in the focus group.

The second one is snowballing sampling. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit “hidden populations,” that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies (Mack et al., 2005). Participants chosen by typical case sampling recommended and invited their friends who meet the requirements to become new participants for focus groups.

In the end, I received 62 volunteer applications, 50 of whom were eligible to participate in the focus group. 50 volunteers were preliminarily contacted and invited including 35 people through typical case sampling and 15 people through snowball sampling. Finally, 24 people among them were chosen as final participants in focus groups, including 16 through typical case sampling and 8 people through snowball sampling. I conducted four separate focus groups with a total of 24 participants, six participants in each group. Participants for each group were then selected randomly.

6.3.4 Participant inclusion criteria and sample description

Anyone for whom the topic is relevant can logically be an appropriate participant (Mack et al., 2005). In this study, participants were required to meet the following criteria: they must be over 18 years old, hold Chinese nationality, speak fluent Chinese and reside in mainland China; all participants were required to have watched the 2022 Winter Olympic Games for at least 30 minutes and to know Eileen Gu; additionally, participants must have consumed products from official Olympic sponsoring categories, such as milk, beer, or sports clothing brands; preferably, they had also participated in online or offline Olympic-related activities.

In this research, 24 participants were purposively sampled to ensure maximum variation across professional backgrounds and experiences. The sample included 12 ordinary Olympic spectators and customers of sponsor products, who were employed or studying in industries unrelated to sport or the Olympics, as well as four staff members from sport companies, four sports media practitioners, and four Olympic volunteers of Beijing 2022. Participants were stratified according to key demographic criteria, including age, gender, education, occupation, and relevant experience. Participants were then randomly allocated into four focus groups, with each group containing three ordinary spectators/customers, one staff member from a sport company, one sports media practitioner, and one Olympic volunteer. Efforts were made to maintain gender balance within each group, aiming for three males and three females per group.

Although participants' occupational backgrounds were not explicitly distinguished during data analysis, this stratified design was intended to enhance participant diversity and to capture a wide range of perspectives. In line with Kitzinger (1994), even in groups that appeared relatively homogeneous (e.g., by gender, race, or class), important divergences in opinion often emerged, driven by differences in personal experiences. Such spontaneous dissent during group discussions enabled participants to articulate and clarify their perspectives in situ, providing richer and more nuanced insights than might have been achieved through individual interviews.

The decision to balance gender representation within the groups also sought to mitigate the potential for one gender to dominate the conversation, as gender dynamics have been shown to influence group interaction and discourse patterns (Kitzinger, 1994;

Liamputtong, 2011). However, it must be acknowledged that this design operates within a binary understanding of gender, thereby overlooking non-binary and gender-diverse identities. This constitutes a limitation of the research, potentially reinforcing gender binarism and underrepresenting gender diversity (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014).

The sample size of 24 participants across four focus groups was determined based on the principle of data saturation rather than statistical representativeness. In qualitative research, data saturation refers to the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection (Guest et al., 2006). Studies have shown that saturation often occurs within the first few focus groups when the study population is relatively homogeneous (Hennink et al., 2017). Given the relatively narrow participant criteria (e.g., Chinese nationals, experiences in watching the Olympics, consumers of sponsorship products), four focus groups provided sufficient breadth and depth to capture key variations without unnecessary redundancy. Thus, the sample size is appropriate and methodologically sound for the aims of this study.

6.3.5 Recording and Transcription

All focus groups were conducted by researchers in an online meeting room via Tencent Meeting, considering the COVID-19 issue and lasted approximately 120 minutes. The data collection duration was from 1st May to 26th May in 2022. Interviews of focus groups were conducted in Chinese, as the native language of the researcher and all interviewees is Chinese. The audio of focus groups was recorded by using the built-in recording function of Tencent Video software. The researcher videotaped the interviews not only in order to capture exactly who was speaking so that the data could be accurately transcribed but also to make it easier for participants to see each other's reactions during the conversation since facial expressions and body language are also part of communication. Then the researcher used the transcription function of the Xunfei Hearing platform to transcribe the records. The transcribed content was proofread by researchers and then translated from Chinese to English.

Given that the focus group discussions were conducted in Chinese, a process of translation and linguistic transformation was necessary to present the data in English. During translation, the researcher engaged in selective editing by removing filler words, repetitions, hesitations, and colloquial expressions to enhance readability and coherence, while striving to

preserve the original meaning of participants' statements. Such transformations, although common in qualitative research (van Nes et al., 2010), introduce the potential for subtle shifts in meaning. Therefore, particular attention was paid to maintaining the authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and trustworthiness of the data. Reflexivity was exercised throughout the translation process to critically assess how researcher subjectivity might influence the reconstruction of participant voices (Temple & Young, 2004). This approach aims to balance linguistic clarity with methodological rigor, acknowledging the inevitable interpretative layer added by translation.

6.4 Data Collection Method: Document and Records

6.4.1 Introduction

Document and records analysis is a valuable data collection method in qualitative research. It refers to the systematic examination and interpretation of written, visual, and electronic documents (Sandelowski et al., 2006). This method involves reviewing diverse sources such as reports, archives, newspapers, policy documents, and other relevant materials to collect data that is reliable, valid, and contextually rich.

The advantages of document and records analysis in qualitative research are considerable. First, it provides access to both historical and current data relevant to the research topic (Silverman, 2013). Second, it enables the examination of a wide range of information and supports methodological triangulation. Third, it offers insights into the perspectives and intentions of document authors, which may not be accessible through other data collection methods (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Furthermore, it is a non-intrusive method that does not interfere with participants' natural settings or behaviours (Kelle, 2006). Additionally, document analysis can uncover patterns and themes that may not emerge through interviews or observations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and provides valuable background information that helps to frame and contextualise the research findings.

6.4.2 Selection of Cases: Sponsors Included in This Study

In this study, documents and records mainly include sponsors' advertising materials (such as social media posts, posters, and promotional videos) and media reports. The sponsors selected for document analysis were official domestic and global partners of the

Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, as well as personal sponsors associated with prominent athletes, such as Yili, Mengniu, Yanjing Beer, Tsingtao Beer, Anta Sports, Coca-Cola, and Samsung. Selection criteria were focused on sponsors with significant advertising presence during the Games.

6.4.3 Sources of Data

The documents and records reviewed in this study were collected from the following sources:

- (1) Advertising materials published on sponsors' official social media accounts, particularly Weibo posts related to Olympic campaigns.
- (2) Marketing materials, including promotional posters, as well as video recordings of the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.
- (3) Media coverage and reports pertaining to the 2022 Winter Games, with particular emphasis on reports about sponsorship activities, consumer reception, and brand narratives.

6.5 Data Analysis Method

6.5.1 Data Analysis Strategy

This study employs a dual-path qualitative data analysis strategy to investigate how Olympic sponsorship in China constructs and communicates ideological meaning. The research is guided by a semiotic framework applied to two types of data: (1) video advertisements produced by Yili and Mengniu for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, and (2) transcripts from focus group interviews with Chinese consumers. Each data type was analysed using appropriate techniques rooted in the semiotic tradition, but with distinct methodological procedures.

For the advertisements, a scene-by-scene semiotic analysis was conducted, drawing from established methods of film and video discourse analysis. For the focus group data, a two-stage approach was adopted: first, thematic sorting based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (2006) helped structure the discourse into conceptual categories; second, semiotic analysis was applied to the transcribed discourse, treating it as ideologically encoded

text. This integrated approach enables a multi-layered reading of both media content and audience interpretation.

6.5.2 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement Texts

The semiotic analysis of the advertisements involved detailed scene-by-scene breakdowns of two Olympic-themed videos produced by Yili and Mengniu. Each advertisement was segmented into individual scenes, with systematic documentation of the following elements: visual imagery, on-screen text/subtitles, voiceover, music and audio cues, and the overall pacing and transition. This allowed for the isolation of discrete symbolic units within the broader narrative of each campaign.

Key scenes were selected for in-depth analysis based on their symbolic density, emotional resonance, or cultural relevance. Drawing from Roland Barthes' (1972) semiotic triad—denotation, connotation, and myth—the analysis unpacked how individual signs function to construct ideological meaning. Denotation refers to the literal image or text; connotation addresses the associated cultural and emotional meanings; and myth refers to the ideological narratives that naturalise particular worldviews. These elements were triangulated with attention to colour, gesture, temporal sequencing, and symbolic repetition.

This form of multimodal semiotic analysis is particularly suited to Olympic advertising, where commercial messages are often interwoven with nationalistic imagery, emotional storytelling, and performative identity cues. The method illuminates how such campaigns not only promote a brand, but also participate in the symbolic construction of nationhood, gender, and consumer citizenship.

6.5.3 Thematic Sorting as Analytical Pre-Step of Focus Group Analysis

The analysis of focus group interview data followed a two-stage process that integrated both thematic coding and semiotic discourse analysis. This approach was adopted to capture not only the recurrent patterns of audience interpretation, but also the symbolic, ideological, and rhetorical dimensions embedded in their speech.

In this study, thematic analysis was used as an initial step to analyse qualitative data derived from focus group discussions. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke

(2006), is a flexible and widely used qualitative method that identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (or themes) within data. It is particularly suited to studies that seek to explore participants' interpretations and lived experiences, as it allows for both explicit and implicit meanings to emerge from rich textual data (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012).

The focus in thematic analysis is not on the frequency of words or phrases, but rather on the broader thematic structures that reveal patterns of thought, emotion, and discourse. In this study, thematic analysis was applied manually to transcribed focus group data, allowing the researcher to identify latent themes related to participants' perceptions and experiences of Olympic sponsorship, with a particular focus on issues surrounding national identity and gender ideology. Codes were developed as summary labels representing core ideas in the participants' speech and then linked to the data as interpretive markers (Guest et al., 2012).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, the thematic analysis unfolded as follows:

Familiarisation: Audio recordings were transcribed in full, and the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of each focus group discussion. Initial notes were taken to capture emerging patterns and reflections.

Generating Initial Codes: Meaningful segments of text were highlighted and assigned descriptive codes that captured specific ideas related to media interpretation, emotional response, symbolic association, and sociocultural commentary.

Searching for Themes: The codes were then organised into broader categories based on thematic similarity. These categories were refined iteratively to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness.

Reviewing Themes: The preliminary themes were compared across different focus group transcripts to identify consistent patterns or diverging interpretations. Themes were revised or combined where appropriate.

Defining and Naming Themes: Final thematic labels were defined, and supporting excerpts were grouped under each theme to clarify the interpretive focus.

Producing the Thematic Framework: A conceptual map was constructed showing the relationship between core themes, subthemes, and research questions, laying the foundation for semiotic discourse analysis.

As a result of this process, two overarching thematic clusters emerged as dominant interpretive zones:

- (1) National identity and collective belonging, and
- (2) Gender ideologies and symbolic representation.

These thematic domains provided the analytical scaffolding for the next stage of the study, in which participants' discourse was treated as text and analysed through using a semiotic framework. It is important to note that while the thematic analysis helped structure the corpus, the primary analytical lens of the study remained semiotic. The themes were not treated as endpoints, but as entry points into a deeper examination of how ideology is encoded in and through everyday language.

6.5.4 Semiotic Analysis of Focus Groups

6.5.4.1 Semiotic Analysis of Audience Discourse

In the second stage of analysis, participants' verbal responses—once transcribed—were treated as culturally situated texts that encode ideological meaning. This approach follows a semiotic tradition in which speech acts are not merely expressive, but symbolically structured and socially embedded. Within this framework, focus group discourse is conceptualised as a site where signs, metaphors, and rhetorical constructions are mobilised to express, reproduce, or contest dominant narratives.

While semiotic analysis is conventionally applied to visual media—such as advertisements, film, or posters—this study extends its application to verbal data, treating participants' language as a symbolic artefact shaped by broader ideological codes. This enables both the systematic identification of recurring symbolic themes and the critical interpretation of how Olympic sponsorship campaigns are decoded by audiences in relation to national identity, gender roles, and sociopolitical ideology.

Although analysing transcripts alone necessarily excludes non-verbal dimensions such as tone, gesture, or facial expression—which may also carry meaning—this study is primarily concerned with the discursive and semiotic structure of spoken content. The emphasis lies not in how statements were performed, but in what was said, and how that language operates symbolically.

This method reflects a shift away from traditional content analysis, which tends to focus on manifest meanings and frequency counts, towards a deeper investigation of how meaning is socially constructed, ideologically encoded, and symbolically mediated through discourse. In this sense, semiotic analysis functions not only as a tool for reading advertisements, but also as a lens through which audience discourse can be interpreted as an ideological artefact.

6.5.4.2 Theoretical Framework: Hall, Barthes, and Eco

This study adopts a theoretically integrative framework that synthesises insights from Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Umberto Eco to analyse focus group data concerning media and advertising discourse. The framework enables a layered interpretation of participants' responses, connecting semiotic structures, audience positioning, and ideological inference.⁽¹⁾

Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

Firstly, Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973/1980) provides a framework for understanding how individuals engage with media narratives from various interpretative positions. Hall's model reconceptualises the communication process as a dynamic interplay between message production and reception (Hall, 1980; Kropp, 2015; Shaw, 2017). In this model, encoding refers to the process by which media producers construct messages using culturally embedded codes and conventions. These messages are shaped by institutional power structures and dominant ideologies (Hall, 1980; Ni, 2024). Decoding, on the other hand, is the interpretative act performed by audiences as they make sense of the received messages. Importantly, decoding is not passive; audiences actively interpret media texts in light of their own cultural backgrounds, social positions, and lived experiences (Xie et al., 2022; Ross, 2011).

Hall (1980) identifies three main decoding positions:

Dominant/hegemonic: The audience fully accepts and reproduces the intended meaning aligned with dominant ideology (Hall, 1980; Shaw, 2017).

Negotiated: The audience partly agrees with the message but modifies it in line with their own context or reservations (Ross, 2011; Kropp, 2015).

Oppositional: The audience rejects the intended meaning and interprets the message in a counter-hegemonic way, often challenging the ideological assumptions embedded in the text (Hall, 1980; Ni, 2024).

This model has become foundational in media and cultural studies, enabling scholars to analyse how meaning is not simply transmitted, but actively constructed and contested in reception contexts.

In this study, focus group discussions are treated as discursive spaces that simultaneously decode existing media content and encode participants' own ideological standpoints. This dual role corresponds to Hall's (1980) model of communication, where media reception is understood as an active and interpretive process. The model is therefore applied at two interrelated interpretive levels:

First-level decoding: Participants' verbal responses reflect how they interpret and position themselves in relation to the media texts they have previously encountered. These interpretations can be aligned with, negotiated, or resistant to dominant cultural codes.

Second-level decoding: The researcher treats participants' discourse as a form of encoded ideological expression. Their statements, once transcribed, become a new form of media text—a symbolic construct—that is further analysed using semiotic tools to uncover latent meanings, myths, and socio-political positioning.

This two-tiered application builds on the view that the communication process is a semi-open system, where meaning is constantly negotiated through the interplay of producers and receivers (Xie et al., 2022). As such, the encoding/decoding framework is not only applicable to mass media texts, but also offers critical insights into the production and interpretation of meaning within mediated dialogue, such as focus group interactions.

(2) Barthes' Semiotic Triad

At the second interpretive level, participants' verbal expressions—transcribed from focus group interviews—are treated as ideologically encoded texts. The analysis draws upon Barthes' semiotic model (1972), applying his triadic structure of denotation, connotation, and myth to deconstruct participants' descriptions and interpretations of advertising and media discourses. As previously discussed in the literature review, this method facilitates the identification of both surface-level meanings and deeper ideological constructs embedded in cultural texts (Barthes, 1972).

While denotation identifies the literal or surface-level meaning of an expression, and connotation reveals the associative or culturally mediated meaning, myth refers to the naturalisation of ideology within discourse. Barthes argues that myth operates to render historically and culturally contingent meanings as “common sense” or “natural”, thereby masking the operation of power and ideology (Barthes, 1972). Within this framework, participants’ statements are not merely descriptive but ideologically performative—they reproduce or resist dominant discursive formations, often unconsciously.

Thus, in this study, the researcher interprets participants’ discourse not only in terms of what is said, but also how the structure of signification—the arrangement of signs, symbols, and metaphors—reveals latent ideological positions. For example, recurrent references to “our country”, “successful”, or “genius girl” in the participants’ descriptions of advertisements may encode neoliberal, nationalist myths or patriarchal, respectively.

(3) Eco’s Abductive Logic

Finally, Eco’s theory of abduction (1981) is incorporated to analyse the inferential logic underlying participants’ articulated viewpoints and embedded ideologies. According to Eco, interpretation is not merely a decoding of predetermined meaning but an *abductive process* in which the reader/researcher formulates hypotheses about the socio-cultural mechanisms that shape the emergence of certain meanings (Eco, 1981; van Hulst & Visser, 2024)

In this study, participants themselves act as encoders of meaning: their statements reflect internalised beliefs and value systems that are, to varying degrees, shaped by hegemonic media structures (Hall, 1980). As members of a media-saturated culture, their understanding and expression of social phenomena are often mediated by dominant ideologies disseminated through education, entertainment, and advertising. This positions the participants not as ideologically neutral subjects, but as active yet situated meaning-makers, whose discourse bears traces of the media messages they have absorbed.

To investigate the socio-institutional origins of these ideological articulations, the study adopts Eco’s theory of abduction (Eco, 1981). Abduction refers to the process by which the interpreter—here, the researcher—constructs a hypothesis to explain why a particular ideological position (myth) emerges from a given set of discursive data. Unlike deduction or

induction, abduction is an inferential leap, prompted by textual cues and contextual knowledge (Hulst & Visser, 2024). For instance, if multiple participants implicitly justify gender inequality using familial or moralistic language, the researcher may abductively infer the influence of state-aligned educational narratives or mainstream media representations of gender.

Thus, Eco's abductive reasoning adds a third layer to the interpretive arc—enabling the researcher to hypothesise the cultural or institutional roots of ideological statements, based on recurring discursive patterns within the focus group data.

Overall, this multi-layered semiotic approach to audience discourse analysis allows the study to go beyond surface-level interpretation and engage with how media ideology is embedded, internalised, and potentially contested in everyday speech. The theoretical integration of Hall, Barthes, and Eco ensures that meaning is explored not only as an effect of media messages, but also as a dynamic, negotiated process within lived cultural experience.

6.6 Ethics

Ethical considerations refer to the protection of the participants' rights, obtaining informed consent and the institutional review process (Klopper, 2008). In doing this study, I provided adequate information on each of these aspects.

6.6.1 Informed consent

Informed consent needs to be obtained from the participants, as well as the research site and the relevant authorities (Klopper, 2008). The researcher should receive Informed Consent Form signed by participants and informed verbal consent from participants in focus groups. When I initially contacted potential participants and invited them to be my focus group participants, I send them a registration form. They need to fill in their personal information and consumption habits on the registration form. At the same time, I did a survey on their Olympic-related experience through the registration form. I informed them that they would need to complete the registration form if they would like to sign up as a participant in my focus group. After they have agreed and completed the registration form, I would give them informed consent and ask them to fill it out, and I stated that I would use their personal information on the informed consent. All focus group participants completed an informed consent form before the official start of the focus group. Also, all the participants knew the

researcher held their name (preferred name), age, gender, location, education, time spent watching the Olympics, and spending habits.

6.6.2 Protection of participants' rights

(1) The right to self-determination

All the participants have the right to decide whether to participate in the study voluntarily, to stop participating in the study at any time without fear of penalty, and to object to the researcher to use of the recordings and transcriptions.

(2) The right to privacy

The researcher protected the privacy of all participants through pseudonyms and anonymity. The registration forms filled out by each participant with their personal information were kept confidential. During focus group interviews, each participant used a pseudonym to ensure that their real information was not leaked to other participants. No one other than the research institute was allowed to videotape to ensure that the content of the interview and the video would not be leaked. In paper writing, the researcher referred to participants by their pseudonyms or reference numbers rather than their real names.

(3) The right to autonomy and confidentiality

All the recordings and participants private information are under password protection and specified for this thesis use only. All the data collected for this research was uploaded and stored in the University One Drive, including video recordings and transcription of focus groups, pictures and notes of observation, and advertising materials on social media.

(4) The right to fair treatment

The researcher treated every participant fairly and respected everyone.

(5) The right to protection from discomfort and harm

All participants were in a safe and comfortable environment. Because of the pandemic and the lockdown in China, it is unsafe and inconvenient to gather focus group members in one room, so focus groups were conducted online. Each participant could participate in the focus group at home or wherever they feel safe and comfortable. In addition, the researcher avoided inviting vulnerable groups as participants such as children, and the whole participants are adults.

6.6.3 Institutional Review Board approval- Appendix

The researcher's ethics application has been approved by the Institutional Ethical Review Board. According to the request of the ethics committee of the University of Edinburgh, the researcher has completed the mandatory Data Protection Training.

6.7 Research Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of this constructivist qualitative study, a multi-dimensional framework was adopted, grounded in Guba and Lincoln's (2001) evaluative criteria. In accordance with constructivist principles, the study intentionally eschewed positivist notions of "validity" and "reliability", instead foregrounding the four trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—as originally proposed by Guba and Lincoln and later elaborated by Anney (2014) and Alexander (2019), whose contributions continue to inform contemporary qualitative standards. Anchored in the philosophical assumptions of relativism and hermeneutic dialecticism, research quality was enhanced through sustained engagement with the field, reflexive practice, and stakeholder involvement across multiple stages of data collection and interpretation.

To reinforce the credibility of findings, this study applied triangulation across both data sources and perspectives. Following Denzin's (1989 cited by Denzin, 2012) framework, multiple forms of triangulation—data, methodological, and theoretical—were applied to ensure interpretive convergence (Alexander, 2019; Anney, 2014). In this study, credibility was enhanced via triangulation across data sources (focus groups and documents), and prolonged engagement with the research context. Participants were invited to verify translated transcripts and the thematic structure derived from both focus group discussions and semiotic readings of Olympic sponsorship messages. Furthermore, although member checking was not conducted in this study, the translation and interpretation of transcripts were performed by the researcher, a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese with over five years of academic and professional experience in English-speaking settings. The researcher holds an IELTS score of 7.0 and has completed postgraduate education in the UK through English-medium instruction. This linguistic and cultural fluency, combined with deep contextual knowledge of both Chinese and British communicative norms, enabled high-fidelity translation and interpretive accuracy. Reflexive documentation throughout the research

process further supported the transparency and traceability of interpretive decisions. While member checks are valuable, it is recognised in the literature that alternative strategies—such as researcher linguistic competency and reflexive translation—may serve as appropriate substitutes where direct participant validation is impractical or methodologically unsuitable (Anney, 2014; Temple & Young, 2004).

Transferability was ensured through thick description. Thick description should include methodological transparency and contextual immersion to allow the reader to assess relevance to their own setting (Anney, 2014). In this study, thick description included cultural, historical, and socio-political contextualisation of Olympic sponsorship discourse; such layered description enables readers to judge the relevance of findings to other contexts.

Dependability was addressed by maintaining a transparent audit trail of methodological decisions and analytical coding. Field notes, codebooks, and transcription logs were stored systematically to support the integrity of the research process.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, which not only documented analytical decision-making but also enabled the researcher to critically interrogate their own assumptions and positionality—consistent with constructivist commitments to transparency and accountability (Alexander, 2019).

Aligning with constructivist traditions, this study did not aim to seek objective “truths” but rather to co-construct meaningful, contextually grounded interpretations of Olympic sponsorship and branding. The interplay between participant voices and researcher interpretation—both systematically documented—forms the basis for analytical integrity and scholarly contribution.

6.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the research design demonstrates a coherent alignment between its constructivist paradigm and methodological choices. By embedding qualitative case study methods, thematic and semiotic analyses, and participant-centred data collection techniques within a relativist and hermeneutic-dialectic framework, the study maintains strong internal consistency. This table illustrates this alignment across ontological, epistemological, and analytical dimensions, ensuring methodological rigour and philosophical coherence. This alignment enhances the study’s credibility and trustworthiness, reinforcing its ability to

generate rich, contextually grounded insights into Olympic sponsorship and consumer interpretation within the Chinese sociocultural context.

	Constructivist Position	Application in This Study
Ontology	Relativism: Reality is multiple, socially constructed, and context-dependent	Olympic sponsorship is interpreted differently by different stakeholders (e.g., consumers, brands, the state)
Epistemology	Transactional Subjectivism: Knowledge arises through interaction between researcher and participant	Knowledge about brand meaning is co-constructed through focus groups and interpreted within cultural frameworks
Axiology (Values)	Values are embedded in the research process; the researcher cannot be neutral	Reflexivity acknowledged; researcher's cultural awareness and role are documented in a reflexive journal
Methodology	Hermeneutic Dialecticism: Iterative interpretation and negotiated meaning through dialogue	Thematic analysis + semiotic analysis based on dialogue, cultural texts, and participant-generated meanings
Research Strategy	Qualitative, interpretive case study	Case-based exploration of Chinese consumer perceptions of Olympic sponsorship in a national-cultural context
Data Collection Methods	Participant-centred; focus on narrative, meaning, and interaction	Focus groups, document analysis of sponsor campaigns and media texts
Data Analysis	Interpretive and iterative; meaning is constructed, not measured	Thematic coding to identify recurring patterns, followed by semiotic decoding of symbolic elements
Research Role	Co-constructor of meaning; reflexive and engaged	Actively facilitating focus groups, interpreting meanings in context, reflecting on positionality
Truth Criteria	Trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability	Audit trail, thick description, triangulation, reflexive journaling

7. Semiotic Analysis of Yili's Advertisements

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Historical and Cultural Attitudes Toward Milk in China

Milk consumption in China, despite having ancient roots, did not integrate into mainstream Han Chinese dietary culture until recent centuries. Ancient records indicate the use of cow's milk and fermented dairy products such as cheese and yogurt (Mak, 2021). However, due to preservation difficulties and widespread lactose intolerance, dairy products were not widely consumed, except among nomadic communities where dairy played a staple role. In the Central Plains, where Han culture dominated, the dietary norm rarely included milk, despite acknowledgments of its health benefits in historical texts such as Li Shizhen's "Compendium of Materia Medica."

Cultural beliefs were pivotal in shaping attitudes. Confucian ethics promoted the notion that breastfeeding was a moral duty of mothers, and the idea of feeding human infants animal milk was perceived as unnatural and morally suspect. As a result, wet nursing was preferred over cow's milk, reinforcing the maternal obligation to nourish with human milk.

During the late Qing dynasty and Republican era, perceptions shifted dramatically. Western influence and colonial presence brought milk consumption into urban centres. Initially rejected as a colonial import, cow's milk was later promoted as a modern, health-giving food by reformists. Liang Qichao, in particular, linked national rejuvenation to improved public health, advocating milk and physical exercise as means of strengthening the populace (Lu & Fan, 2010). He challenged the Confucian prioritisation of scholarly over martial values, proposing instead that physical vitality was key to national success.

This nationalist framing of milk as "nature's perfect food" (Mak, 2021) re-emerged after China's economic reforms. The modern government continues to promote milk consumption and sports participation as pillars of national strength. This ideological continuity underpins contemporary efforts to frame milk as both a patriotic and physically beneficial commodity.

7.1.2 Milk and Sports Sponsorship in Contemporary China

The entwinement of milk and physical fitness has laid the ideological foundation for dairy brands' involvement in sports sponsorships. This trend is particularly evident in

Olympic sponsorship, where two leading Chinese dairy producers—Yili and Mengniu—have vied for exclusive partnerships.

In 2019, Mengniu entered a landmark joint partnership with Coca-Cola and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), gaining global visibility as a TOP sponsor (IOC, 2019). However, Yili had been a domestic sponsor of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics since 2017. This led to a dispute over exclusivity, with Yili accusing Mengniu of infringing on its sponsorship rights. The IOC's listing of Mengniu and Coca-Cola's joint logo on its site contrasted with the Beijing Organising Committee's exclusion of Mengniu, reflecting tensions over sponsorship legitimacy (IOC, 2022).

Such conflicts illustrate the strategic value brands place on Olympic association. Historically, dairy products have had minimal presence in sports sponsorships, especially when compared to beer or soft drinks (Bragg et al., 2018). This is partly due to perceived incongruence between milk and sports imagery. Yet emerging research suggests milk shares functional similarities with sports drinks, such as aiding recovery after exercise (James, 2012; Rankin et al., 2019; Roy, 2008). These shared associations—health, vitality, and strength—enhance the perceived sponsorship fit (Koo & Lee, 2019).

From a branding perspective, milk companies aim to transfer the positive image of the Olympics including excellence, safety, and global prestige onto their products. This is particularly crucial in China, where consumer trust in domestic dairy brands remains fragile. The 2008 melamine scandal severely damaged public confidence, with 300,000 infants affected and at least six fatalities due to adulterated milk products (Xiu & Klein, 2010). Consequently, many Chinese consumers turned to imported dairy, believing it to be safer (Li et al., 2019). Olympic sponsorships, with their rigorous vetting and global credibility, offer domestic brands a path to restore trust.

Moreover, the Olympic association allows dairy brands to imply—without explicitly claiming—health benefits and success narratives in advertising. Chinese Advertising law prohibits direct health efficacy claims for general food products (chinalawtranslate.com, 2015). However, by using athletic imagery and Olympic champions as endorsers, brands can evoke associations with strength, intelligence, and achievement, aligning with aspirations of both parents and consumers.

7.1.3 Relevance to Research

Understanding this historical and cultural context is crucial to interpreting contemporary dairy advertising in China. The symbolic role of milk—as a product once shunned but now embraced as a marker of national strength and modernity—adds layers of meaning to sponsorship strategies. Dairy brands leverage nationalist discourse, safety concerns, and fitness culture to construct compelling brand identities.

This background informs the subsequent analysis of how Yili and Mengniu use Olympic sponsorship in advertising to build trust, associate with excellence, and position themselves as leaders in the dairy industry. These strategies not only reflect market competition but also the enduring legacy of milk as a symbol of national rejuvenation and maternal care.

7.2 The Semiotic Analysis of Yili's brand name and logo

Yili Group is China's largest dairy enterprise with various product categories. Yili is an official partner of world-renowned sporting events and elite summit meetings, such as the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, and the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games. On the evening of February 3, 2022, the night before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Yili released a 30-second advertisement film on its official Weibo account, accompanied by an introductory Weibo post as the description of the video. The advertisement film featured many Chinese national team athletes of this Olympics, such as Wu Dajing and Liu Jiayu. One of the reasons this advertisement film was selected as the main data of advertising materials in this study is because it serves as a primary marketing and promotional material for Yili's Olympic campaign during the Beijing 2022 Olympics. It was not only broadcast on television but also featured as mid-roll or pop-up ads on online streaming platforms during Olympic event broadcasts. Another reason is the Weibo post with this advertisement film generated tremendous heat and engagement on the social media platform, being reposted up to one million times and garnering over 70,000 likes. Therefore, consumers and audiences who focused on or watched the Games then were much more likely to see this advertisement film than other promotional videos or advertisements by Yili.

In this section, the semiotic analysis will be conducted separately on the textual contents of the advertisement film, including the slogan and introductory post text, as well as

the visual video itself. Since the language of both the Weibo post and the advertisement film (including text and voiceover) is Chinese (Simplified Chinese and Mandarin), the researcher will first present their original Chinese texts and then translate them into English.

7.2.1 The brand name

The brand name of ‘伊利 (Yili)’ is formed by two Chinese characters. The first character ‘伊 (Yi)’ was normally used as a pronoun in ancient Chinese literature having three meanings including this or that, he or she, and you, but this usage is hardly seen in modern Chinese. Yili Group chose the meaning of he or she and you, to symbolize ‘everyone’. The second character ‘利 (Li)’ has three main meanings including sharp, quick, and beneficial or benefit. Yili Group chose the meaning of benefit. Therefore, Yili means ‘everyone’s benefits’ and has a connotative meaning that everyone can benefit from Yili.

7.2.2 The brand logo

Yili's logo is formed by the surrounding of two crescents. The blue crescent above signifies the sky because the colour of the sky is usually blue when it is clear. The green crescent below signifies grassland because the colour of grass is usually green. Here the symbolism of sky and grassland further signifies the signified of nature. The white oval surrounded by these two crescents in the middle of the brand as the bottom background symbolizes milk, because the colour of milk is generally white. In the centre of the oval are two red Chinese characters "伊利", which is the brand name ‘Yili’. The colour of red is used here for the brand name not only because red is the most eye-catching colour, but also because red is the symbolic colour of China and socialism. The logo of blue and green crescent shapes surrounding white milk and the red Yili brand symbolizes that Yili and Yili's dairy products are grown in nature, and has a connotative meaning that Yili's products are natural and therefore healthy.

According to Yili's official report, the entire logo uses a circle as its outline, expressing a dynamic balance, which is not only in line with the harmony and tolerance advocated by traditional Chinese culture, but also symbolizes the unique spiritual connotation of Yili Group: the smart circle gives people the feeling of ‘endless life’, just like the ‘green industrial chain’ advocated by Yili Group, meaning the harmonious coexistence with nature, society, the public, and industry partners, thus forming a ‘green ecosystem’ for the sustainable development of the entire industrial chain.

7.3 The Semiotic Analysis of the text of Yili's marketing campaign

7.3.1 The slogan

‘奥运品质 我耀此刻’ (‘Ao Yun Pin Zhi, Wo Yao Ci Ke’) is the slogan and also the theme of Yili's Olympic marketing campaign. If the slogan is directly translated into English, the literal and denotative meaning could be ‘Olympic Quality, I Shine at This Moment’. However, if this slogan were simply translated literally into the English version like this, we would not be able to appreciate the implicit meaning produced by the rhetorical techniques in the original Chinese sentence. Additionally, the directly translated version has some ambiguity because some Chinese word combinations are not meaningful combinations of words in English, such as ‘Olympic Quality’. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a semiotic analysis of this slogan sentence word by word because it not only implies the Olympic marketing goals of the Yili brand but also reflects the Chinese culture and values hidden in the Chinese language.

As mentioned above, the first half of this slogan ‘奥运品质’ (‘Ao Yun Pin Zhi’) has the literal and superficial meaning of ‘Olympic Quality’. The first and second Chinese characters can form the word ‘奥运 (Ao Yun)’ in this sentence meaning 'Olympics', and the third and fourth Chinese characters can form the word ‘品质 (Pin Zhi)’ meaning 'quality'. But what does ‘Olympic Quality’ mean here? Its connotative meaning is actually ‘the quality of Yili's dairy products is as high as the quality of the Olympic Games’. A metaphorical rhetorical device is used here, where the characteristic of the Olympic Games is transformed into the characteristic of Yili, that is, high quality. Metaphor works in an associative way, embedding unknown things into a new associative word sequence, whereby the unknown things gain part of their new meaning. Thus, metaphor requires an active, imaginative act of decoding, and the reader has to discover which features make for a meaningful transformation. This metaphor can have a meaning perceived by Chinese readers because in the minds of Chinese consumers, ‘high quality’ is one of the impressive images of the Olympic Games, or in other words, the Olympic Games are a symbol of "high quality". This image and symbol arise not only because the Olympic Games are the most prestigious high-level sports events in the world, with the best athletes representing the highest level of competition, but also because the Olympic sponsors are brands that have been strictly

screened and checked by the Olympic Organizing Committee. Consumers will believe that the quality of sponsor products is guaranteed, especially the food and drinks that will be consumed by Olympic athletes must be safe, healthy, and nutritious. At the beginning of this chapter, it has been emphasized that safety is the first decisive factor in milk purchase choice for Chinese people, followed by nutrition, due to the 'sequelae' of the Chinese milk scandal in 2008. In milk advertisements, promoting and highlighting their milk products are 'high quality', which has multiple meanings such as safety and nutrition, is crucial in China because it can break people's concerns about the safety of milk to some extent.

The second half of this slogan is '我耀此刻' ('Wo Yao Ci Ke'). The rhetorical devices here are a metaphor and a pun achieved through a homophone. The first Chinese character '我(Wo)' in this sentence means 'I', the second Chinese character '耀(Yao)' means 'shining', and the third and fourth Chinese characters form the word '此刻(Ci Ke)' meaning 'this moment'. As mentioned before, the denotative meaning of this sentence could be 'I Shine at This Moment'. Combining the story of this commercial with the background of the upcoming Winter Olympics, the 'I' here can be interpreted as an Olympic athlete, and 'this moment' can be interpreted as the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. The original meaning of '耀(yao)' is to shine like light, which can be translated as shine, sparkle, or twinkle. Here it is a metaphor for the athlete's outstanding performance on the field, which is as dazzling and shining as the sun or light, attracting the audience's attention. Therefore, the implicit meaning of this sentence can be interpreted as that the outstanding performance of Olympic athletes makes them shine in the Winter Olympics.

However, this sentence is not natural in Chinese. In other words, there is no such expression in Chinese, because the character '耀(yao)' does not appear as a single word in Chinese as a verb expressing the meaning of shining. Rather, this character is a component of some words and can be only combined with other Chinese characters to form a correct Chinese word. This sentence looks unnatural literally in Chinese, but it sounds natural phonetically and reads aloud naturally because of the rhetorical device of a pun with homophones. The pronunciation of '耀(yao)' in Chinese is the same as that of another Chinese character '要(yao)', which can be used as a one-word (or one-character) verb meaning wanting and needing. Thus, when people listen to or hear this slogan instead of seeing it, the message they can receive should be 'I want this moment', which has a

connotative meaning that I, the Olympic athlete, want the chance to play at the Olympic Games.

7.3.2 The introductory post text

When Yili's official Weibo account released the advertising film, the original Chinese text of the introductory post text was attached as follows.

@伊利: #北京冬奥会#今日开幕, 双奥之城圣火再燃! 无数次蓄力坚持, 换来此刻光芒绽放。@伊利 以十七年奥运品质助力中国奥运健儿闪耀赛场, 今晚邀你一起见证闪耀时刻! #奥运品质 我耀此刻#

The English translation for this is as follows.

@Yili: #Beijing Winter Olympic Games# open today, and the holy flame burns again in the dual Olympic city! Countless moments of perseverance and dedication have led to this shining moment. Yili, with seventeen years of Olympic quality, supporting Chinese Olympic Jian Er (athletes) to shine on the field, tonight invites you to witness the shining moment together! #Olympic Quality, I Shine at This Moment#

Link:https://weibo.com/5913574490/4732937524479384?wm=3333_2001&from=10E4093010&sourcetype=weixin&s_trans=6037289046_4732937524479384&s_channel=4

Most of the content of this introductory post text can be directly translated into English to understand its meaning. The metaphorical images of 'shine at this moment' and 'Olympic quality' have been explained in the previous slogan analysis. The intention in this passage is obviously to use the upcoming opening ceremony of the Olympic Games to emphasize Yili as an Olympic Games The identity of the official sponsor and its help and support for the Olympic Games.

The second half of the first sentence, ‘双奥之城圣火再燃’ can be directly translated into ‘in the dual Olympic city, the holy flame burns again’, meaning Beijing will host the Olympic Games again. The Dual Olympic City (‘双奥之城’) is used here to refer to Beijing. This name comes from the report on the IOC official website, because Beijing is the first city in the world to host both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games (IOC, 2021). ‘圣火’ has the original Chinese meaning of ‘Holy Flame’, while here the Holy flame is a metaphor of

the Olympic flame. Since the Olympic Games were introduced to China from the West, everything about the Olympic Games was translated from English into Chinese. When translating the word ‘Olympic flame’, it was not directly translated into the ‘奥运 (Olympic)’ and ‘火 (flame)’, but the word ‘(圣) holy’ was added, turning into ‘奥运圣火 (Olympic holy flame)’. The words of ‘奥运圣火 (Olympic holy flame)’ and ‘圣火 (holy flame)’ are frequently used in Chinese media reports, official Olympic organization documents, and Chinese government documents to refer to the Olympic flame; on the contrary, its directly translated version, the word ‘奥运火焰 (Olympic flame)’, almost never appears in Chinese reports. The ‘Olympic holy flame burns again’ means the Olympic Games will be host again, because the Olympic flame and Olympic Torch Relay are the symbols used in the Olympic movement. The word expressing holy and divine connotations is used to describe the flame, and even holy flame as the vehicle metaphorizes the Olympic flame as the tenor. This reflects that the Olympic flame is sacred and have a high status in the hearts of the Chinese people. The Olympic Games are deified in China and are full of halo. Therefore, everything about the Olympic Games is so important, and hosting the Olympic Games has become a special occasion worthy of national celebration.

In the second sentence, the first half of the sentence ‘countless times of perseverance and dedication’ refers to the countless times of hard practice of athletes outside the competition field in daily life. The second half of the sentence ‘this shining moment’ has a similar meaning to the ‘I shine at this moment’ in the slogan, that is, the athletes want to perform excellent and win good results in this Olympic Games.

In the third sentence, ‘with seventeen years of Olympic quality’ means that Yili has been a sponsor of the Chinese Olympic Committee for 17 years. In November 2005, Yili became the dairy product sponsor of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Until 2022, 17 years later, Yili is still the official domestic Olympic sponsor of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. The meaning of Olympic quality is good quality as explained in the previous section on Semiotic Analysis of the Slogan. Therefore, the meaning of this sentence is that Yili has maintained good quality of its milk products over the past seventeen years.

It is worth mentioning that in the third sentence when Yili emphasized its support for Chinese Olympic athletes, it did not directly use the word ‘运动员 (Yun Dong Yuan, athlete)’, but used the word ‘健儿(Jian Er)’. There is an important use of military metaphor,

which reflects the symbolic relationship between sports and military/war. This word comes from ancient Chinese literary works. Its original meaning is robust person, but it is more often used to describe a person as a valiant fighter, generally referring to soldiers and warriors in poetry from the Han Dynasty to the Republic of China period (202 BC - 1940s). Especially after the reform of the enlistment system in the Tang Dynasty, soldiers who guarded remote areas for a long time were called official ‘Jian Er’, or Long March Jian Er, and border defense Jian Er (Shi, 1996). This military system was called the ‘Jian Er system’. However, although the change is difficult to trace, it is very common today in media reports in China to use the term ‘Jian Er’ to refer to athletes. In Chinese media discourse, sports or sports events are often formed together with the word ‘Jian Er’, such as ‘sports Jian Er (sports athletes)’, ‘Olympic Jian Er (Olympic athletes)’, ‘football Jian Er (football athletes)’, etc. Using the word ‘Jian Er’ as a metaphor for ‘athlete’ seems to have become a conventional usage in modern Chinese language. When readers see the word ‘Jian Er’, they will only think of ‘athlete’, while its original meaning of ‘soldier’ and the military overtone in its essence is invisible, as if the word originally only refers to sports athletes. Besides, there are many military metaphors in sports in Chinese media discourses. For example, the ‘Olympic team’ is metaphorized as the ‘Olympic Corps’, and athletes’ ‘preparing for competition’ is metaphorized as ‘preparing for war’. Coincidentally, the analogy of sport and war is not uncommon in other countries. For example, in football teams coaches were portrayed as militaristic generals and the athletes as soldiers in a study based in Australia (Kellett, 2002).

7.4 The Semiotic Analysis of Advertising Film

This advertisement film mainly tells the story of Chinese national team athletes who are about to participate in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics practicing sports in an icy and snowy environment. The structure of this film is segmented. Specifically, the first three segments tell three stories of Wu Dajing practicing short-track speed skating from scene 1 to scene 7, double figure skaters practicing jumping from scene 8 to scene 11, and Liu Jiayu practicing halfpipe snowboarding from scene 12 to scene 16. The three stories about three different athletes express the same theme, that is, the athletes are practicing hard to prepare for Beijing 2022. It attempts to interpret that Chinese Olympic athletes have the sportsmanship and Olympic spirit of enjoying the competition, being fearless of challenges, and surpassing themselves. In the end, athletes from multiple Chinese national teams walk towards a certain location and stand in a row together shouting the slogan of this

advertisement. The story written in the advertisement should link the product or object with the subject position of the desired and expected attribute, so that the consumers, can take up the subject position in the story by associating himself or herself with the product, thus gaining access to the desired attributes (Huisman et al., 2006). In this advertisement, Yili intends to link its main product, boxed ‘pure milk’, with the attributes of Chinese Olympic athletes such as health, excellence, and national pride.

7.4.1 The Table of Contents

Scene	Duration	Images	Text	Voice
0	video cover			
1	00:00-00:01	A close-up of a man drinking milk. There is Yili’s LOGO in the lower right corner (it is present throughout the video.)	White Chinese characters appear on the left side of the screen. The larger characters in the first row are 'Wu Dajing', and the smaller characters in the second row are 'Short Track Speed Skating Winter Olympics Champion'.	
2	00:01-00:01	Close-up of skate blades of ice-skating boots cutting across the ice.		
3	00:01-00:02	Full body view of Wu Dajing skating with one hand holding onto the ice ground.		
4	00:02-00:03	Wu Dajing split into two of him		

5	00:03-00:04	Two ice skaters were seen in the distance in the glacier canyon with a super long-range view.		
6	00:04-00:05	The camera zooms in, showing two people skating one after another, chasing each other. The person behind suddenly overtakes the person in front		
7	00:05-00:07	A close-up side view of a person overtaking another person	Blue Chinese characters: ‘耀，超越自我’ (want to transcend myself)	Narrator/voice-over (male voice): ‘要超越自我’ (want to transcend myself).
8	00:08-00:08	A high-altitude shot, from top to bottom, from far to near, through the trees to a frozen lake		
9	00:09-00:10	The man (left) in blue and the woman (right) in red were performing pairs figure skating on a frozen lake. In the background are woods and snowy mountains.		
10	00:10-00:07	The man lifted the woman up and threw her into the air from left to right.		

11	00:10-00:11	The woman in red leaped and spined in the air with her skirt blooming like petals. Five frozen poses of her appeared in the air. She jumped higher than the snowy mountains in the background.	Five white simplified Chinese characters appear vertically on the left: 耀 尽情绽放 (want to bloom to my heart's content).	The male and female voices said together: 耀 (要) 尽情绽放 (want to bloom to your heart's content).
12	00:11-00:12	In a super distant view was a huge ski halfpipe run on the snow-capped mountains. There was a small figure in the distance, jumping up from the cliff.		
13	00:12-00:13	In a close-up, medium-shot, and bottom-up shooting angle, a person jumps in the air while standing on a snowboard. The camera captured the black bottom of the skis. The skier in red looks down at the camera. The lower left of the background picture is the cliff, and the upper right is the sky.		
14	00:13-00:15	A skier wearing a red and black ski suit jumped from a high place in front of her and landed on her snowboard. At the	Five blue simplified Chinese characters appear vertically on the left side of the screen: 耀 无惧挑战	Female narration/voice-over: 耀 (要), 无惧挑战

		moment she landed, she was divided into three figures. The one on the left fell to the left, the one on the right fell to the right, and the one in the middle slid straight toward the camera.	(want to be unafraid of challenges).	(want to be unafraid of challenges).
15	00:16-00:17	The figure in the middle keeps skiing forward, toward the upward direction of the ski halfpipe run.		
16	00:17-00:19	The skier, Liu Jiayu, lay on the snow, drinking Yili milk with a smile on his face. The completely overhead shot slowly zooms out to reveal the snowboard on her left side lying on the snow.	The white words on the left side are horizontal, the first line of large characters: 刘佳宇 (Liu Jiayu); the second line of small characters: Snowboarding World Champion	
17	00:20-00:20	Back view of four people walking on ice wearing ice skates and red and yellow training suits.		
18	00:20-00:21	The camera came to the front of this group of people, with white Chinese characters appearing in the middle.	中国(China) 短道速滑 (short track speed skating team)	

19	00:21-00:22	Four people bent over and wearing skates and red and black clothing were side by side, sliding towards the camera.	White Chinese characters appear in the middle: 中国速度滑冰队(Chinese Speed Skating Team). Bottom subtitle: Yili, for 17 consecutive years	Male voice-over/narration: 伊利连续 17 年, 营养支持中国健儿 (Yili, for 17 consecutive years, nutritionally support for Chinese Jian Er/athletes).
20	00:22-00:23	Four people wearing red, white and yellow ski suits and carrying skis were walking side by side.	White Chinese characters in the upper left corner of the screen: 中国自由式滑雪空中技巧队 (Chinese Freestyle Skiing Aerials Team).	
21	00:23-00:24	Three men in ice hockey gear skate on the ice.	Subtitles below: 营养支持中国健儿 (Nutritional support for Chinese Jian Er/athletes).	
22	00:24-00:25	Three people wearing red and black ski suits approached from the front holding snowboards.	White Chinese characters on the left side of the screen: 中国单板滑雪 U 型场地队 (Chinese Snowboard Halfpipe Team).	
23	00:26-00:27	20 athletes from various winter sports wearing their equipment and	The white Chinese character in the centre of the upper	Voice-over/narration: 拼过就是闪耀

		uniforms stand in a row on the ice of the frozen lake.	part of the screen means: 拼过就是闪耀(Efforts are shining).	(Trying your best is exactly shining).
24	00:28-00:30	The logos of Yili and Beijing 2022 are at the top of the screen. In the centre of the screen, various Yili dairy products are arranged in a row horizontally on the white background. Ribbons in the five colours of the Olympic rings are sprayed from the top of these products, and then an arc-shaped inverted rainbow composed of these five colours slides out.	A line of small words below the logo reads "Official Partner of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics". Golden Chinese characters on the top of the product are the slogan. Golden Chinese characters at the bottom of the screen: 十七年奥运品质值得信赖 (Seventeen years of Olympic quality are trustworthy). There are two lines of small words in the lower right corner.	Voice-over/narration: 奥运品质, 我耀此刻 (Olympic quality, I shine at this moment)

7.4.2 The signification process

There are some relatively more important and meaningful scenes in this advertising film that I will focus on analysing their signification process and underlying meaning, including scenes 1, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 20, 23, and 24.

Scene 1: This is a close-up shot of a young man wearing a helmet holding a box in his hand and sucking from a straw in front of white mountains. The denotative meaning here is that Dajing Wu, a Chinese short-track speed skater, and Winter Olympics champion, drinks a

box of Yili milk before skating in a frozen environment. This denotative meaning is formed through the interpretation of a series of signs in this scene.

First of all, the close-up of the young man's face allows people who focus on China's winter sports and the Winter Olympics to recognize that this face belongs to the famous Chinese short-track speed skater Dajing Wu. The Chinese characters ‘武大靖(Wu Dajing)’ and ‘短道速滑世界冠军(Short Track Speed Skating Winter Olympics Champion)’ on the left side of the screen also clearly reflect the protagonist's identity. Because this face and these two rows of Chinese characters serve as signifiers, audiences can recognize the identity of ‘Olympic champion Dajing Wu’. Second, Wu's outfit signifies that he is wearing skating equipment and a skating suit. Although what Wu wears on his head is not fully displayed, from the hatband connected from his head to his chin, and based on audiences' understanding of his identity as a short track speed skater and the sports equipment of this sport, audiences can tell he's wearing a skating helmet instead of a regular hat. The clothes on his body only reveal a yellow and red collar here, but this collar can signify the uniform he always wears at Games, because the national team uniforms worn by Chinese athletes when participating in the Olympics are usually red and yellow. His full set of skating equipment and suit underlies he is ready to go skating later. Third, the signifier of the box can have a signified of a box of Yili liquid milk, because the box in the picture clearly shows its product packaging including images and text so that people can identify the product. In the centre of the front of the box, there are three big blue Chinese characters for ‘纯牛奶(Chun Niu Nai)’, which means pure milk. Above them are the logo of Yili, which consists of the two Chinese characters ‘伊利(Yili)’, and the logo of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Fourth, only two fingers appear in the lower right corner of the scene, but the combination of the milk box above the fingers can still make people think that he is holding a milk box with his hands. Dajing Wu has a straw in his mouth, and his mouth shape is an ‘oh’ shape. This is the usual mouth shape when people use straws to drink liquid in daily life. Therefore, his posture can signify that he is sucking milk from the Yili milk box, meaning he is drinking Yili milk. Fifth, the white mountains in the background signify the snow-capped mountains, suggesting that Wu is in a freezing-cold environment, underlying the icy ground on which he can skate later.

The lens language of upward shots is generally used to reflect the tallness or oppression of the characters. The shot here is an upward shot of Wu Dajing, the protagonist of the film, which shows that he is a powerful and excellent athlete. Dajing Wu drinking Yili

milk when wearing the equipment that symbolizes the national team uniform might make people think that the Chinese national team has chosen Yili milk as a drink for athletes to supplement energy and nutrition. This denotation can signify a connotation of the theme of this advertisement which is Yili can help and support Olympic athletes in Chinese national teams to have good performance and achievement at the Games.

Scene 7: According to the previous plot, a skater skating on the ice splits into two bodies of himself. Two skaters who have the same appearance are skating and racing with each other on the icy ground, expressing the symbolic meaning of competing with themselves. In this scene, there is a close-up side view of one skater overtaking another skater. According to the semiotic analysis of scene 1, it is known that the protagonist of this scene is Dajing Wu. Therefore, the denotative meaning here is that in the process of skating and racing with himself, one Dajing Wu surpassed another Dajing Wu, that is, he surpassed himself. The linguist texts and narrator in this scene have basically the same meaning. There are five blue Chinese characters on the left, ‘耀 超越自我 (Yao Chao Yue Zi Wo)’, which means ‘want to transcend myself’. As mentioned in the previous analysis of the slogan, the first Chinese character ‘耀 (yao)’ is a pun worked through homophones. In this sentence, ‘耀 (yao)’ no longer signifies the meaning of ‘shining’ which is the actual original meaning of this Chinese character itself, because in that case the sentence would be unsound and unnatural and would not produce the correct meaning, but signifies its homophone ‘要 (yao)’ used here to mean ‘want to’. The last four Chinese characters can form two words respectively, namely ‘超越 (Chao Yue)’ which means transcendence, and ‘自我 (Zi Wo)’ which means oneself. Therefore, the sentence composed of these five Chinese characters means ‘want to transcend myself’, and the male narration or voice-over in this scene says the same thing. In addition, the use of male voice dubbing here attempts to make the audience feel that it is Wu Dajing himself who is speaking, which can bring the audience closer to the protagonist in the film and enhance credibility by transferring that of the celebrity to the commercial.

Based on the background of the upcoming Winter Olympics and the premise of Dajing Wu drinking Yili milk for preparation, this scene conveys the connotative meaning that Dajing Wu wants to achieve better performance at Beijing 2022 than his previous results to surpass himself, and Yili milk can help him do that. If combined with the introductory text of this Weibo post and the cover of the advertising film, it is known that there is not only Dajing Wu but also many other Chinese athletes would participate in Beijing 2022 and they

might also drink Yili milk as the endorsers of Yili. Therefore, the underlying meaning that this ad film attempted to convey is Yili milk can help Chinese athletes like Dajing Wu achieve better performance at Beijing 2022 to surpass themselves. The ideology here can be that the purpose of making efforts is to make progress, to surpass myself, and to be better, instead of competing with others.

In addition, this story about Dajing Wu in this film also can reflect the ideologies of patriotism and Chinese nationalism. On the one hand, this scene implicitly links Wu Dajing to the national pride of winning the Olympics. In this scene (scene 7), the skating suit he wore in the film is more fully displayed. It is a skating suit with red as the main part of the body and yellow as the sleeves. As already mentioned in scene 1's analysis, Dajing Wu's skating suit and helmet in the film look similar to the Chinese national team uniforms and equipment he always wears when participating in games. For example, when participating in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, he wore the uniform with several big yellow or golden five-pointed stars on a red background, and when participating in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics he wore the uniform with a golden dragon and small yellow five-pointed stars printed on the chest on a red background. While the association related to the team uniform is generated, it may also remind the audience of the moment of victory and glory when Wu won the gold medal for China at the Pingchang Olympics.

On the other hand, this scene attempts to awaken the audience's national identity through reminders of Chinese national symbols. Castelló and Mihelj (2018) claim, national symbols include official national symbols such as the national flag, name or emblem, and unofficial national symbols related to the cultural elements in that nation. The heavy use of red and yellow in the skating suit is a reminder of the national flag of the People's Republic of China, which is the Five-star Red Flag with five yellow stars and a red background. As Xu (2021) points out, the Five-star Red Flag is a symbol of the country and its national identity and a crucial means to unite the Chinese people. Moreover, the skating helmet he wears in this film is decorated with a golden dragon on a red background, which is actually the same as that he worn on the field at Beijing 2022. The golden dragon is a famous and popular Chinese cultural element (Wilson, 1990), and the colour of the helmet is also red and yellow.

In short, the signifier of Dajing Wu's skating suit and helmet has the signified of Chinese Olympic national team and Chinese national symbols because of the colours of red and yellow and the golden dragon. They led to further signified of the Olympic Games and

Chinese national identity and national pride. As a result, the first act of Dajing Wu's story from scene 1 to scene 7 in this film can reflect the ideologies of patriotism and Chinese nationalism.

Scene 9: The man in a blue shirt on the left and the woman in a red short dress on the right are skating on a frozen lake in the background of woods and snowy mountains. The denotative meaning here is that a female player and a male player are practicing figure skating pairs mixed for the Games. Their clothing styles and colours reflect the gender stereotype of the creator of this advertising film. First of all, in terms of clothing style, for Figure Skating Costume, Yili chose to have male figure skaters wear trousers and female figure skaters wear skirts in this film because this is in line with the traditional aesthetic and gender stereotype of 'men wear pants and women wear skirts' (Akdemir, 2021). There was always a tradition of female figure skaters wearing skirts until 2006 when ISU abolished the mandatory requirement for them to wear skirts. But even so, for a long time, the vast majority of female figure skaters still wore skirts on the court. Second, it is a typical manifestation of gender stereotypes to consider clothing colour as a gender characteristic. For example, in the minds of people with gender stereotypes, cool colours are seen as more masculine colours, such as the idea of blue and green for boys, while warm colours are more feminine colours, such as the idea of pink and red for girls (Cunningham & Macrae, 2011; Xue et al., 2024).

Another thing worth noting is that there is no linguistic text or name label explicitly presenting the identities of these two figure skaters in this story or showing what their names are. They are the only protagonists among the three short stories in this commercial whose names are not shown exactly.

Scene 11: The woman in the red dress was tossed, and she leaped and spun in the air with her twirl skirt. Five frozen poses of her jumping appearance in the air. She jumped higher than the snowy mountains in the background. The camera is an upward view of the bottom of her skirt. This scene selects a jumping movement of a female figure skater to make it clear that this is a figure skating pairs mixed and not an ice dance mixed. They are two sports programs that look too similar to distinguish them by audiences in a few seconds of the video, but ice dancing does not allow large acrobatic jumps such as tosses and high lifts like the female skater was doing in this ad film (IOC, 2022b).

Five white simplified Chinese characters appear vertically on the left are '耀 尽情绽放 (Yao Jin Qing Zhan Fang)', which means 'want to bloom to my heart's content'. The

voice-over here is male and female voices saying this sentence together. The character ‘耀 (yao)’ has the same meaning and usage as that in the analysis of scene 7 referring to ‘want to’. The last two Chinese characters ‘绽放 (zhan fang)’ form a word meaning ‘blooming’. Normally this word is used to describe flowers or buds bloom. In this scene, the twirl skirt of the female figure skater looks like a blooming flower when she jumps and spins in the air. It is a metaphor for a twirl skirt as a flower.

As can be seen, the twirl skirt or ‘blooming’ skirt only happens when the female figure skater practices this jumping skill in figure skating. In single and pairs skating, jumps as very important and difficult skills form a significant portion of the final scores. The successful completion of good jumping movements can often add a lot of points to figure skaters, and even achieve good results to win. As a result, both the image of the twirl skirt on the screen and the language and characters of ‘绽放 (zhan fang)’, which means blooming, in this scene can be a signifier, having a signified of a good and successful jump skill in figure skating. In other words, the ‘blooming’ skirt is the symbol of good performance in figure skating. Therefore, combined with the context and the background of the upcoming Winter Olympics, the connotation is that Chinese figure skaters want to perform well and achieve good results at the Games.

This scene reflects a perspective steeped in the male gaze and sexualization of female athletes’ bodies. First of all, there is a low-angle shot of the upskirt of this female figure skater jumping high. Generally speaking, the photography method of a low-angle shot is to highlight the powerful image of the character or create a sense of oppression, but what is special here is that the object being photographed is the upskirt of a female athlete. The angle of this up skirt shot is more similar to a creepshot angle (Chan, 2018). As Keats and Keats-Osborn (2013) point out, with a camera, a photographer can “freeze” movements and “zoom in” on certain narrow fields of view to shoot sports-related voyeuristic images, in the themes of ‘Sexy Sport Positions’ and ‘Sports Erotica’. Especially, ‘upskirt’ and ‘downblouse’ photography can be seen as typical cases for considering athletic voyeurism (Keats & Keats-Osborn, 2013). In addition, besides the above-mentioned metaphor of the twirl skirt of female athletes during jumping movements to a blooming flower, another metaphor commonly seen in literature and artworks is also hinted at, that is, the metaphor of women as flowers. There is a controversy among gender studies scholars and feminists about whether the metaphor of "women are like flowers" is a form of male gaze in a patriarchal society or female self-

empowerment, which I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapters. But here, combined with the display of gender stereotypes in colour and clothing and the upskirt shot analysed above, this metaphor is placed here to emphasize the passive and sexualized woman image and traditional femininity like a flower which is beautiful and can be admired under the male gaze, rather than a powerful athletic image and athleticism.

Scene 14: A skier, wearing a red and black ski suit, red and white ski goggles, and a black ski helmet, jumped from a high place of the ski halfpipe run and landed on her snowboard. At the moment she landed, she was divided into three figures. The one on the left fell to the left, the one on the right fell to the right, and the one in the middle skidded straight forward to the camera. The fall signified her failure in the skiing challenge. The middle one of her skiing straight forward to the camera, signifies that she succeeds in the skiing challenge.

It is difficult to directly determine who is the skier from this scene, because the skier's face is obscured by ski goggles, and her or his name is not shown on the screen at this time. Although her identity would be clearly uncovered until Scene 17, there are still some signs and symbols in this scene hinting that she is Liu Jiayu, the silver medalist in the women's snowboarding halfpipe at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. For example, the halfpipe shown in the background and the snowboard worn by the skier suggest that this is a halfpipe snowboarding athlete. Furthermore, while the ski suit and gear obscure her identity and physical gender characteristics, the female voice in the voiceover reveals that the skier is a woman. Then the audiences are required to have some knowledge of the Winter Olympics or Chinese winter sports to decode these signs because Liu Jiayu's silver medal in the women's halfpipe snowboarding at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics was China's first medal in snowboarding at the Games before 2022. In some official media reports, Liu Jiayu was called 'China's number one snowboarder' who made history (xinhuanet.com, 2018; Beijing Daily, 2021).

In this scene, there are five blue simplified Chinese characters vertically on the left side of the screen, which are '耀 无惧挑战 (Yao Wu Ju Tiao Zhan)'. The female voice-over or narration says the same sentence. The character '耀 (yao)' has the original meaning of 'shining' and here refers to the meaning of its homophonic character '要(yao)' which is 'want to'. '无惧 (Wu Ju)' is a word formed by two Chinese characters used as a verb or adjective to mean 'not afraid of' or 'fearless'. '挑战 (Tiao Zhan)' is a word formed by two Chinese

characters used as a noun or verb to mean ‘challenge’. Therefore, the meaning of this sentence is ‘want to be unafraid of challenges’. Combining the visual images with linguistic text and narration, the denotative meaning of this scene is that Chinese snowboard athlete Liu Jiayu failed several challenges while practicing halfpipe snowboarding, but she was not afraid of the challenge, kept working hard, and finally successfully completed the challenge.

In addition, Liu Jiayu’s image in the advertising film serves as a signifier, and the signified is her competition image when she won the silver medal at PyeongChang 2018. In this scene, she can be seen wearing a red snowboard jacket, black snow pants, and a black helmet, which look the same as what she wore when competing at PyeongChang 2018. As a result, the image of the athlete Liu Jiayu has become a bridge between this advertisement and the Winter Olympics, generating the audiences to think of the Winter Olympics when watching the ad film, thereby establishing a psychological association between Yili and the Olympics in their minds. In this way, the venues and scenario can extend from the halfpipe training ground in the commercial to the entire Olympic stadium and all the Olympic Games. On the other hand, as an Olympian of the Chinese national team, Liu Jiayu's identity may become a signifier leading people to be reminded of the entire Chinese national team and all Chinese Olympians as the signified. At this time, this spirit of not being afraid of challenges has also been extended from the personal qualities of Liu Jiayu herself to those of all athletes in Chinese national teams. As a result, the connotative meaning of this scene is that Chinese Olympic athletes are fearless in challenges and will keep trying again even if they fail in the Olympics.

Scene 16: After a successful challenge, the skier, Liu Jiayu, lay on the snowy ground, drinking Yili milk with a smile on his face. The completely overhead shot slowly zooms out to reveal the snowboard on her left side lying on the snowy ground. In this scene, the lying position of Liu Jiayu, her left hand spreading out, her unworn ski goggles, and her unsettled snowboard thrown aside, all reflected that she was in a state of relaxation after being tired by skiing practice. A high-angle waist shot captures her casually lying on the snow, as relaxed as she is lying on a snow-white bed. At this time, she was holding a box printed with Yili’s logo and the name of its milk in her right hand, and a straw connected from the milk box to her mouth, suggesting that she was drinking Yili milk. She looked at the camera and smiled while drinking milk. Smiling often expresses positive emotions, such as joy and contentment. Here, her smile is not only a smile of victory after a successful ski challenge, but also a smile of

satisfaction with the Yili milk she drank. Therefore, the denotative meaning of this scene is Liu Jiayu chooses Yili milk as her after-sport drink and is very satisfied with Yili milk.

There are two lines of white horizontal Chinese characters on the left side. The first line of large characters presents ‘刘佳宇’, which are the Chinese characters of Liu Jiayu’s Chinese name; the second line of small characters presents ‘单板滑雪世界冠军’, which means ‘Snowboarding World Champion’. The world champion here refers to the fact that she won the 2009 World Snowboard Championships in Gangwon. This scene clearly presents the identity of the protagonist in this story as Liu Jiayu, through her complete and recognizable face shown here when she is not wearing ski goggles, as well as this linguistic text information.

In addition, Liu Jiayu drinking milk after practicing skiing can imply an underlying meaning that milk can help her replenish energy and nutrition for recovery after sport. The purpose here is to make Yili milk signify a good after-sport drink or workout recovery drink. Based on Scene 14's analysis, Liu Jiayu not only represents herself in this ad film but is also a symbol of the Chinese national team. Therefore, the connotation of this scene is that Yili milk, as a good after-sport drink, can help Chinese national team athletes like Liu Jiayu replenish energy and nutrition to recover after training and competition.

The gender ideology of this advertising is patriarchal in nature, which can be seen from the different images of male and female athletes in the film. The protagonist in the first story, Wu Dajing, has a resolute, serious, and unsmiling 'poker face' no matter when he is drinking milk during preparation, racing during a competition, or successfully achieving his goal of 'surpassing himself'. Based on Wu Dajing's performance in interviews and reality shows, we can know that being serious and unsmiling is not due to his own personality; on the contrary, his personality is cheerful, approachable, and humorous. Therefore, this 'lack of affinity' image was deliberately arranged and created by the film director or creator in order to highlight the 'aggressive' masculinity that runs counter to 'affability'. Comparing Liu Jiayu in the third story, through her happy smile after a successful challenge and her satisfied smile after drinking milk, her image is built and strengthened with the image characteristics of "affable" as opposed to "aggressive". Being affable is a requirement for traditional femininity in patriarchy. Before scene 17, when the skier was so tightly wrapped by loose snowboard ski and equipment that it was difficult to see who it was, let alone determine its gender, the image of the skier practicing a dangerous snowboard trick in halfpipe was actually powerful,

ambitious, sporty and athletic, with an obvious sportsmanlike temperament. However, when she took off her ski goggles and revealed her true identity as a woman, the athleticism that symbolized power and ambition was erased from her body, leaving behind a harmless female figure relaxingly lying, smiling, and drinking milk. Smiling is kind of pleasing and flattering in itself. As for Wu Dajing, this male athlete does not need to please anyone, not even the brand Yili who sponsoring him, so he does not need to smile satisfied with Yili when drinking milk before skating. This gender ideology in sports reflected by the Yili advertising will be analysed and explained in more detail and in-depth in the next section.

Scene 20: A low-angle medium shot of four people, wearing ski helmets and ski suits with the Yili's logo badge on their sleeves, and carrying skiboards, are walking side by side towards the left. The background is white snowy mountains. The connotation of this scene is four athletes from the Chinese freestyle skiing aerials team walked towards a certain location after practicing skiing. Firstly, from their clothes and equipment, it can be inferred that these four people are skiers in Chinese national teams. The ski suits they wore were mostly red and white, with yellow lines as embellishments. As analysed in scenario 7, the red and white uniforms can signify the Chinese national team uniforms worn by athletes in the Olympic Games. At the same time, red and yellow together symbolize the five-star red flag of the Chinese national flag. Second, there are 12 white Chinese characters in the upper left corner of the screen - '中国自由式滑雪空中技巧队', which means Chinese Freestyle Skiing Aerials Team, with '中国自由式滑' (Chinese Freestyle Skiing) in the first line, and '空中技巧队' (Aerials Team) in the second line. This sentence not only tells the audience that the people in the screen are freestyle skiing aerials athletes, but also emphasizes that they are members of the Chinese national team and their "Chineseness". Third, The facial features of the four characters in the picture can reveal their identities. The first person from right to left, closest to the camera, is Xu Mengtao, a female skier, one of Yili's brand ambassadors. She is the gold medalist in freestyle skiing aerials at the 2022 Winter Olympics, and the silver medalist of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. The second person from the right with middle-aged looking is Jia Zongyang, a male skier and silver medalist at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. The third younger-looking person from right is Qi Guangpu, a male skier, and the gold medalist at the 2022 Beijing. These three skiers, Xu Mengtao, Jia Zongyang and Qi Guangpu, won the silver medal in the freestyle skiing aerials mixed team at the 2022 Beijing. The person on the far left can be roughly judged to be a young woman from her face and body shape, but she is too far away from the camera and her facial features cannot be seen clearly,

so it is difficult to accurately determine her identity by appearance. However, since they are all members of the Chinese national freestyle skiing aericals team, this young woman should be one of this team. Fourth, their skiboards were taken off and carried on their shoulders rather than wore on their feet, indicating that they had finished skiing practice.

The male voice-over/narration and bottom subtitle spanning the four scenes from scene 19 to scene 22 are ‘伊利 连续 17 年营养支持中国健儿’ (Yili, for 17 consecutive years, nutritionally support for Chinese Jian Er). The meaning of this sentence is similar to the third sentence in Yili's Weibo introductory post. The word ‘健儿 (Jian Er)’ as analysed before originally means ‘soldier’, and here it is a militarized metaphor for ‘athlete’. Milk and dairy products have always been considered beverages or foods that can provide consumers with protein, calcium, vitamins, and other nutrients needed by the human body (Thorning et al., 2016). The denotative meaning of this voice-over is that Yili has been continuously supporting Chinese athletes by providing nutritious dairy products to them for 17 years.

The connotation of this scene needs to be interpreted based on the combination of the denotative meaning of the picture and the voice-over/narration in the above analysis. Firstly, ‘连续十七年 (17 consecutive years)’ means Yili has been a sponsor of the Chinese national team and two Olympic Games in China (Beijing 2008 and Beijing 2022) from 2005 to 2022, for 17 years. Secondly, considering that nutritional intake is important for optimizing sports and exercise performance, milk can be a more nutrient-dense beverage choice for athletes (Roy, 2008). Thus, ‘nutritionally support for Chinese athletes’ means Yili provides milk and dairy products to supplement nutrients for athletes, thereby supporting and helping them achieve better athletic performance. Third, the freestyle skiing aericals team athletes in the scene not only represent themselves but also epitomize and symbolize the entire Chinese Olympic athletes. Fourth, in this scene (and in fact in other scenes as well), the athletes who are selected to appear in the shot and have clear facial features are basically those who have won Olympic medals for China, and are about to participate in Beijing 2022. That is to say, these athletes have already had outstanding performances and excellent results in previous Olympic Games. Therefore, the connotation of this scene is that Yili has provided nutritious milk and dairy products to Chinese athletes who have represented the Chinese national team in the Olympic Games over the past 17 years, helping them to perform well and achieve good results on the field.

Scene 23: All of the 20 athletes from various winter sports who appeared in the previous part of the film, wearing their uniforms and holding their equipment, come together and stand in a row on the ice of the frozen lake, to shout that ‘拼过就是闪耀 (Pin Guo Jiu Shi Shan Yao)’. This sentence is presented in six white Chinese characters above the row of people and is also the voice-over of this scene, read by many male and female voices. This sentence can be simply translated into ‘trying your best is exactly shining’. The first Chinese character ‘拼 (Pin)’ is a polysemous word with multiple meanings in Chinese, and here it means making lots of effort, trying your best, or fighting desperately. The denotative meaning of this sentence is as long as you have made efforts and tried your best, you will shine. As explained in the previous analysis of the slogan, ‘耀 (Yao)’ and ‘闪耀 (Shan Yao)’ have the denotative meaning of ‘shine’ and the underlying meaning of ‘perform excellently’ and ‘succeed’. Combined with the previous story of the athletes practicing hard and the background of the upcoming Winter Olympics, the connotation is that as long as these Chinese athletes try their best on the field in Beijing 2022, no matter what the result is, they will be regarded as excellent and successful.

Scene 24: This scene is the last one in the whole ad film, which is mainly used to emphasize Yili is an Olympic sponsor, thereby implying that its milk and dairy products are of good quality and showcasing its multiple dairy products. The specific explanation is as follows. First, at the top of the screen are the logos of Yili on the left and the Beijing Winter Olympics on the right, with a line of small black Chinese characters below the logos – ‘北京 2022 年冬奥会官方合作伙伴’, which means ‘Official Partner of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics’. Based on the rhetoric of the images by Roland Barthes (1977), the linguistic message has an anchoring function that guides us to interpret specific information when we see polysemous images and not receive other information. These characters below the logos inform readers that the brands or properties represented by the two logos on the left and right are partners, rather than other relationships such as competitors. This linguistic message is both denotational and connotational, with an obvious emphasis on Yili as an Olympic sponsor.

Second, in the centre of the screen, various Yili’s milk and dairy products are arranged in a row horizontally on the white background. From left to right, they are ice cream, flavored yogurt, soy milk, organic pure milk, Yili pure milk (in the centre), 5G protein yogurt, infant milk powder, fresh milk, and cheese slices. This product display is intended to convey the

following message to the audience as a connotative meaning - although only one product, Yili pure milk, appears in this film, Yili does not only have this one product, but also many other varieties of dairy products, and they also have helped and supported Chinese athletes and the Chinese Olympics like pure milk. Third, ribbons in the five colours of the Olympic rings are sprayed from the top of these products, and then an arc-shaped inverted rainbow composed of these five colours slides out. A dynamic effect is used to draw the viewer's attention to the unique colour scheme. The 'Olympic rings' are formed together by five interlocking rings, coloured blue, yellow, black, green, and red on a white field, as one of the most famous Olympic symbols originally created in 1913 by Coubertin to represent the five inhabited continents (Davis, 2012). The ribbons and the rainbow here are made up of these five colours on a white background. Thus, the colour of the ribbons and rainbow can be identified as a sign of the iconic message to convey the sense of the Olympic rings as a signified. In this way, the Yili products that sprayed these ribbons in these colours and were half-surrounded by the rainbows in these colours have increased their sense of the Olympic rings and enhanced the link with the Olympics.

Next, when the rainbow appeared after the ribbon was sprayed, two lines of golden Chinese characters appeared above and below the row of Yili's products. In the line above, eight large golden Chinese characters are '奥运品质 我耀此刻 (Olympic quality, I Shine at this moment)', the theme of this marketing campaign and the slogan of the commercial. The meaning of this slogan has been analysed in the previous section. In the line below, there is a sentence consisting of 11 small golden Chinese characters framed by two thin golden lines above and below, which means '十七年奥运品质值得信赖' (Seventeen years of Olympic quality are trustworthy). The connotations of '17 years' and 'Olympic quality' have both been analysed and explained in the previous work. The connotation of this sentence is that Yili, as a brand that has sponsored the Olympic Chinese national team for 17 years and two Olympic Games held in Beijing, has high-quality dairy products that are very safe and nutritious, which is worthy of consumers' trust and purchase. In addition, the narration and voice-over of this scene is the slogan and then add 'Yili', read by a male voice, that is 'Olympic quality, I Shine at this moment. Yili'.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how Yili's Olympic marketing campaign strategically deploys semiotic resources to construct a brand identity that aligns with national pride, athletic excellence, and product credibility. Through a multimodal analysis of visual

signs, language, and cultural symbolism, the advertisement embeds connotative meanings such as patriotism, gender norms, and health associations. By linking Yili products with Chinese Olympic athletes, particularly during moments of triumph and discipline, the brand positions itself as a supporter of national ambition and personal achievement. Moreover, the use of colours, metaphors, and rhetorical homophones reflects a deeper cultural embedding that resonates with Chinese audiences. Importantly, the contrast in gendered representations underscores latent patriarchal ideologies, revealing how femininity is still constructed in relation to traditional passivity and appearance. The findings of this semiotic analysis provide critical insights into how dairy brands like Yili leverage sports sponsorship not only for commercial visibility but to embed themselves within dominant cultural and ideological narratives in contemporary China.

7.5 Ideologies

7.5.1 National Identity and Nationalism

Within the context of Roland Barthes' semiotics, the Yili Winter Olympics advertisement constructs national identity through mythic signification. The advertisement functions as a modern myth, in Barthes' (1972) terms, where Olympic athletes are not merely competitors but emblematic figures of national pride. Barthes' idea of myth as a second-order semiological system is crucial here: the denotative image of athletes drinking milk and performing feats of strength becomes the connotative message of China's global ascent and internal unity.

The *mise-en-scène*, dominated by red, white, and gold—colours heavily associated with Chinese nationalism and socialism—reinforces the ideological presence of the state in the realm of consumption. Yili's long-standing Olympic partnership (highlighted as 17 years of "Olympic Quality") mythologises the brand as a patriotic entity supporting China's collective ambition (Yili, 2022). The Olympic flame—described as "holy" (圣火)—is another key semiotic anchor, drawing on religious connotation to sanctify national progress. The brand becomes a symbolic conduit of state-endorsed excellence and cultural authenticity.

Moreover, the phrase "Dual Olympic City" (双奥之城), used in the Weibo post, links Beijing's Olympic legacy to national exceptionalism, constructing the city—and by extension the nation—as a vanguard of global sports culture. Here, the ad invokes Barthes' (1972)

notion of depoliticised speech, wherein nationalism is naturalised as common sense, embedding state ideology seamlessly within commercial culture. Yili becomes a mythological object, where milk is no longer just milk, but an icon of Chineseness.

7.5.2 Gender Ideologies

The gendered representations in Yili's commercial subtly perpetuate traditional binaries through mythic imagery, aligning with Barthes' (1972) theorisation of connotative codes in visual media. Female athletes are consistently shown in aesthetically pleasing, graceful movements (e.g. figure skating and snowboarding), with shots that capture fluidity, delicacy, and visual beauty—connoting femininity and emotional expressiveness. In contrast, male athletes (such as Wu Dajing) are framed through power, speed, and direct confrontation with nature, embodying traits of stoicism and strength.

These connotative signs reaffirm gendered expectations within sporting culture and consumption. According to Page (2006), advertising often constructs femininity through a lens of aesthetics and passivity, even in contexts that claim to celebrate female empowerment. In Yili's ad, the leaping female skater, surrounded by blooming petals and elevated above mountains, echoes the semiotic trope of women as ethereal or transcendent, rather than grounded agents of power. Even the voice-over reinforces softness in her scene, creating a contrast with the assertive, action-driven male narrative.

Furthermore, the portrayal of unity at the end—with men and women lined up in formation—does not disrupt the preceding dichotomies but rather harmonises them under the national ideal. As Dyer (2008) notes, advertising often reconciles gender inequality under the guise of harmony and progress, naturalising distinction while ostensibly celebrating equality. Hence, the advertisement works to stabilise gender difference under a broader nationalist and consumerist framework.

7.5.3 Meritocracy and the Ideology of Excellence

The Yili advertisement foregrounds a clear meritocratic ideology, conveyed through the metaphorical linkage between athletic prowess and milk consumption. This is achieved through the Barthesian principle of associational myth-making, wherein connotative meanings disguise as natural facts (Barthes, 1972). The recurring slogan “Olympic Quality, I

Shine at This Moment” mythologises personal excellence as the result of both physical labour and nutritional consumption, with Yili milk symbolising the essential resource for achieving success.

Scenes of athletes training in austere, natural environments—snow, ice, and mountains—evoke the Romantic myth of the self-made hero overcoming adversity (Solík, 2014). The tripling and splitting of athlete figures during motion suggests internal struggle and transformation, visually embodying self-transcendence. This aesthetic valorises individual discipline and sacrifice, aligning with neoliberal meritocratic values that equate effort with worth and outcome.

Moreover, by showing athletes from various disciplines united in the end under the national banner, the ad transposes individual merit into collective achievement. However, the ideological danger, as Barthes warns, lies in how these signs obscure structural privilege. The ad masks systemic supports (e.g., state sponsorship, class privilege) behind the illusion of equal opportunity, naturalising success as purely a function of willpower and milk consumption.

In this sense, the ad aligns closely with what Solík (2014) critiques as “ideological transparency”—the apparent neutrality of signs masking their persuasive intent. Yili’s milk becomes not only the product but the moral medium of success: drink, train, and succeed—thus, buy in.

8. Semiotic analysis of Mengniu's Advertisements

8.1 Introduction

Since 2008, when China's leading dairy brand Yili became an official local sponsor of the Beijing Olympics, it has been commonplace to see milk brands investing in sport sponsorship in mainland China such as sponsoring sports events, teams, and athletes. For milk brands, effective sports sponsorship requires significant advertising, which serves as a crucial marketing tool. Besides promoting their products, services, and brands to achieve commercial goals, advertisements also convey a message using semiotic signs—such as words, visual images, perhaps a soundtrack, or editing techniques—to express the brand's values and to reflect certain ideologies. However, how the message of the ad is interpreted depends on the consumer as the reader or viewer. Modern visual advertisements make extensive use of intertextuality by alluding to other texts and other media to create signified meaning beyond the literal signifier (Chandler, 1994). According to the intertextual theory of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, the interpretation of a text and the ultimate meaning of the text are made by the reader having an aggregation of many values and things and shaped by a certain culture and situated in a specific historical position (Zengin, 2016).

This study employs the case of Mengniu, one of China's leading dairy brands, to conduct a semiotic analysis of a 30-second video advertisement. Applying Roland Barthes' semiotic method, this analysis examines the visual, textual, and auditory signs within the advertisement to explore their denotation, connotation, and myth. It recognizes that semiotic analysis is incomplete until signs and symbols are meaningfully connected to society, culture, and ideology (Lawes, 2019). The study aims to investigate not only how Mengniu enhances its brand equity through the advertisement but also to shed light on the interconnection between milk and sports by being intertextualized with Chinese culture and history, and more importantly, to discuss the rise of post-feminism, the strengthening of Chinese nationalism, and the admiration for Confucian meritocracy in today's Chinese society reflected through the lens of this advertisement.

Structurally, the first section of this chapter will analyse the brand name and brand mark of Mengniu, because this can reflect Mengniu's corporate culture, brand values and brand positioning, and also provide an information basis for subsequent advertising analysis. The second section is a semiotic analysis of the linguistic text part of this advertisement, including the analysis of its slogan (also the theme) and two introductory post texts on Weibo.

The third section is a semiotic analysis of video advertising, consisting of a table summarizing the video content of each shot, and a detailed analysis of the meaning creation process of ad, including its denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth. For some of the most important shots chosen in this advertisement video, I will interpret more underlying meaning of them, combined other text materials based on the theory of intertextuality. In this section, the advertising video is analysed from the perspective of the advertizing creator, interpreting the meaning that advertisers and brands attempt to convey. In the last section (Section 5), I will analyse the ideologies that the whole advertisement reflects in today's Chinese society, mainly including the myth of milk as perfect food, post-feminism, and Chinese nationalism.

8.2. The semiotic analysis of the brand name and brand mark

8.2.1 Brand name

The word of the brand name 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) consists of two Chinese characters 'Meng'(蒙) and 'Niu'(牛). 'Meng'(蒙) in Chinese characters normally has various meanings, and one of the most famous meaning refers to Mongolia because 'Meng'(蒙) is the abbreviation of Inner Mongolia Province in China located on the Inner Mongolia grasslands. The original meaning of 'Niu'(牛) in Chinese characters is the Bovidae comprising the biological family of cloven-hoofed, ruminant mammals, such as cattle, bison, and buffalo. Therefore, based on Roland Bathes' semiotic theories, the denotation refers to the literal or commonsense interpretation of the sign, and the denotative meaning of linguistic signs is what the dictionary attempts to provide (Chandler, 1994). In this case, 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) as a sign, in the first order of meaning, these two Chinese characters and pronunciation of the word can be a signifier, denoting 'the cattle from Inner Mongolia grasslands' as a denotative signified in Chinese language environment. In China, where people aged 15 and over have a literacy rate of 96.4%, these two Chinese characters in the brand name are easily recognized as common characters in the Chinese language. It is also widely known that 'Meng' (蒙) is the abbreviation for Inner Mongolia on Inner Mongolia grasslands. Consequently, when Chinese consumers see or hear the word 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) as a brand name, most of them can quickly have an association with Inner Mongolia grasslands and the cattle and then infer the

significance of 'the cattle from Inner Mongolia grasslands'—what the brand originally intended to convey and the image it aims to evoke in people's minds.

Connotation is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations usually expressing an emotion or a value, as a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified (Chandler, 1994). Here, denotative sign of 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) and 'the cattle from Inner Mongolia grasslands' can connote a signified of all the information of the milk brand named Mengniu founded in Inner Mongolia and producing cow milk such as the brand position, brand image and products. This association between the signifier and signified was enhanced through Mengniu company's marketing communication where they launched large-scale TV advertisements and sale promotions throughout China mainly to establish a psychological link between all the information of their brand and the literal meaning of 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) in people's minds. For example, for enhancing the association with 'Meng(蒙)', the Mengniu company highlighted their brand and company was located and originated in Inner Mongolia, their founder was born and raised in Inner Mongolia, and their dairy products used the cow milk source from Mongolia grasslands. For enhancing the association with 'Niu'(牛), the Mengniu company highlighted their entrepreneurial spirit is the willing ox spirit symbolizing hard work, tenacity and dedication in Chinese culture, their dairy products are made of real pure cow milk, and their founder's surname is also 'Niu'(牛).

As can be seen, in the process of the second-order of signification, 'Mengniu' (蒙牛) and 'the cattle from Inner Mongolia grasslands' have a connotative meaning of the milk brand/ company named 'Mengniu' and all the information of this brand. However, this signification process can only be accepted based on certain context where the message receivers of the sign should have the knowledge of this milk brand so that they can create the associations between the signifier and signified, because the connotation of Barthes's semiotics is 'culturally coded' (Zlatev, 2015, pp 429). If consumers never heard about the company without the awareness of Mengniu as a milk brand name and never bought the milk products offered by this brand, they would not recognise this connotative meaning. In addition, although the two Chinese characters of 'Meng' and 'Niu' are both easy to recognise by Chinese people and the denotative meaning of the word combining these two Chinese characters is able to be understood as 'the cattle from Mongolia grasslands', there is no language habit in Chinese to combine these two Chinese characters to form a word to express

the denotative meaning. This language habit was created by the brand Mengniu when they promoted their brand and brand name.

Brands can be among a company's most valuable assets. According to Klink (2003), brand meaning can be conveyed by both brand name and brand mark. As a result, choosing a good brand name is important for creating an effective brand. Based on Robertson (1989), a good brand name should be 'simple, distinctive, meaningful, emotional, make use of morphemes, phonemes, alliteration, consonance, and should make a sound associate of product class, as well as being legally protectable'. With the analysis of the signification process of name of the brand 'Mengniu', it is a good brand name for the following reasons: first, this name is very simple with two commonly used characters and easy to pronounce; second, it is easily recalled because it has the image of a cattle from the grasslands of Inner Mongolia; third, it is unique, because there is no second milk company with a similar name in China; fourth, it is very meaningful because the name contains information about the company's birthplace and foundation, the founder's family name and hometown, and main product cowmilk.

8.2.2 Brand mark (logo)

Next, I will conduct a semiotic analysis of the brand mark of Mengniu, as brand mark is also an essential part of conveying brand meaning. Considering that in 2021, Mengniu announced a new company logo, I will analyse only the new logo here. Mengniu's logo is composed of two parts, an image on the left and text on the right. On the right are the two Chinese characters "Meng Niu (蒙牛)", the brand name. The denotation and connotation of the right part of the logo are highly similar to those of the brand name, because they are the same in linguistic meaning. However, the font of these the two Chinese characters of the brand name in this logo is still worthy of analysis, because it can signify the connotative meaning of Chinese calligraph and Chinese traditional culture.

The visual sign of the left part of the logo is a square pattern with a green background and two white arcs inside it. To be more specific, in the green square image, there is a white semicircle in the upper right corner, and the lower part of the square image is a white arc that gradually becomes thicker and thinner from left to right, which is the signifier. The denotation of the visual image refers to what all people see without association to their culture, ideology or society (Bouzida, 2014). Colour is perhaps one of the most widely used

visual elements in product and brand identity to convey positive feelings or communicate intended meaning (Klink, 2003). The colour of green symbolises grass, herbs, or vegetables in general according to Wierzbicka's (1996 cited by Puspita & Tustiawati, 2023) colour theory. The green background as a signifier here has a denotative meaning of the grassland as a signified. The whiter colour signifies a signified of liquid milk. An icon is a sign that resembles its referent in some way, such as suggestive shapes, and onomatopoeic words (Beasley & Danesi, 2010). The white semicircle in the upper right corner is an iconic sign denoting the signified of ox horn, because the curved shape resembles a horn of cattle. The white arc that gradually becomes thicker and thinner from left to right as a signifier denotes the signified of river. According to Mengniu's official explanation, the green grasslands as a signifier connote the Inner Mongolia grasslands where the company was originated, and the white river as a signifier connote the means the section of the Yellow River, called the mother river, that passes through the golden milk source belt on Inner Mongolia grasslands. The cattle horn in the logo as a signifier connotes the meaning of the animal cattle echoing the character "Niu (牛)" in the brand name, and also the spirit of the willing ox in Chinese culture.

Barthes called the bring-together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of 'myth' (Bignell, 2002). Mengniu's brand name and brand mark (logo) jointly convey some connotative brand meanings emphasizing the Inner Mongolia grasslands as the foundation of the company or brand, the cow milk as its main product, and the willing ox spirit that the cattle or ox animal symbolizes in Chinese culture. When these connotations are analysed together, an implicit commonalities and shared value will be found among them, that is the extreme love for the homeland. The Inner Mongolia grasslands or Inner Mongolia, as the foundation of the company, the origin of the milk product, and the birthplace of the brand founder, is the native place for the brand, highlighted in brand name and logo through a combination of textual and visual elements to express the love and attachment to this land. The river in the logo is Yellow River, that Chinese people called the mother river, and the homeland sometimes is also called motherland, because the sign of mother and the sign of home have closely association in many cultures and countries. For example, in many Chinese literary and cinematic works, the homeland is metaphorically referred to as a mother, or is symbolically represented by the term 'mother' (Dong et al., 2022). Another well-known metaphor in Chinese culture is that the drinks produced from the land of our homeland nourish us, much like a mother's milk. The cow milk originating from the grasslands of the

homeland can also be metaphorically likened to the mother's milk of the homeland. The willing ox spirit symbolising hard work, tenacity and dedication, is considered as a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation, always encouraged and promoted by both traditional Chinese culture and the current Chinese government. It carries a strong nationalist hue and was first articulated by Lu Xun who was a renowned Chinese writer, literary critic, revolutionary, and democratic advocate during the Republic of China era. It is used to express the revolutionary commitment to selfless dedication in serving the people willingly and wholeheartedly.

In conclusion, the brand name and logo, symbolizing the spirit and values of the brand, convey a mythical meaning that centres on the love for the homeland, fundamentally grounded in nationalism.

8.3 The semiotic analysis of the text of Mengniu's marketing campaign

A video advertisement lasting 30 seconds with post text as the descriptions of this video was posted by Mengniu on its official Weibo account on 18th of January in 2022 before the opening of the Winter Olympics. In the commercial featuring the skier Eileen Gu, the story of the ad takes place on the ski slopes of the snow-capped mountains and describes how drinking Mengniu milk helps Gu complete a challenge in ski trick during skiing practice. The purpose of this advertisement is to promote Mengniu, a dairy product brand, and its main product, room-temperature liquid milk, through the endorser Eileen Gu. This ad received very high attention, likes, comments, and reposts on Weibo, successfully linking and tightly binding Eileen Gu with Mengniu, achieving a good marketing effect. At the same time, Mengniu achieved successful Olympic ambush marketing through Gu's endorsement advertisement, making many consumers mistakenly believe that Mengniu is the official dairy sponsor of Beijing 2022.

The semiotic analysis will be conducted to analyse the slogan (also the theme) of this series of Mengniu's marketing campaign, the Weibo post text as the descriptions of this video, and the 30-seconds advertising video. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's sign theory and Barthes's semiotic methods, I will examine the linguistic signs, visual elements, and auditory signs of Mengniu's advertisement to explore the meaning conveyed through the signification process and its implicit messages including the denotation, connotation, and myth. The slogan and post text as an important part of this ad will be analysed first because they are the introductory description as the first thing to catch the viewer's eyes when

browsing on social media. If the introductory text is not engaging and attractive enough, viewers will be less likely to click on the video link and spend 30 seconds to watch the entire video.

8.3.1 The slogan

‘#Ran Dong Bing Xue, Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (燃动冰雪, 要强中国) #’ is the slogan and theme of Mengniu’s all marketing campaign centred around Eileen Gu during the months before and after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. This slogan has been importantly highlighted as a hashtag for this Weibo post and video ad and used repeatedly several times in social media marketing by Mengniu’s Weibo account.

The first half of this sentence ‘Ran Dong Bing Xue (燃动冰雪)’ composed of four Chinese characters can be directly translated into English as ‘burning ice and snow’. ‘Ran (燃)’ as a verb in Chinese means burning or lighting, ‘Dong 动’ is used after verbs to express ability or effect, so ‘Ran Dong (燃动)’ can be a combined word meaning burning. ‘Bing (冰)’ as a noun means ice, and ‘Xue (雪)’ means snow. Metaphor and metonymy work together in this advertising slogan. Based on Goossens (1990), metaphor refers to ‘a word is used for something resembling that which it usually refers to’, while metonymy means ‘a word is used for something related to that which it usually refers to’. In this syntagm of linguistic signs, the sign ‘ice and snow’ clearly has a relationship with winter sports venues such as ski slopes for skiing and snowboarding, and ice rinks for ice hockey, especially in Chinese language winter sports are also called ‘ice and snow’ sports in China. In the slogan, the sign ‘winter sports venues’ has been replaced metonymically by the sign ‘ice and snow’ which takes its place.

Metaphor also used in the slogan. ‘Burning ice and snow’ sounds not natural, because we all know that ice and snow do not actually burn but can be heated until melted. The sign ‘burn’ is made to appear similar to heating or hot. There is an omitted subject in this situation. Who is the omitted subject? It is the athlete, or Eileen Gu here. Eileen Gu also cannot ‘burn’, but the slogan asks us to realise that during intense exercise, the athlete’s body becomes very warm, and their temperature rises, as if ignited and burning. The body’s heat transforms the cold environment of the venue, turning it warm, just like the athlete becomes a burning flame, melting the ice and snow.

The four Chinese characters that make up this sentence as a signifier denotes a signified meaning, that when people do extensive exercise such as skiing, their body becomes very warm and feel a burning sensation, and this burning heat can increase the low temperature in the venue like melting ice and snow. When the words ice and snow appeared in advertising two weeks before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, people would easily think of the upcoming Winter Olympics and winter sports. In addition, Mengniu's marketing campaign in 2021 and 2022 were almost entirely centred on their brand ambassador Eileen Gu, the famous free-ski athlete on behalf team China in the Beijing 2022. Hence, the denotative meaning of the first half of this slogan as a signifier can deliver a new signified, a connotative meaning that Eileen Gu skied hard at the Beijing Winter Olympics, generating a lot of heat from her body increasing the temperature like the fire is burning in a frozen skiing venue. As can be seen, Mengniu wants to establish a connection with the Beijing 2022 and winter sports through this slogan and the advertising video with this theme.

The second half sentence of this slogan 'Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (要强中国)' is difficult to directly translate from Chinese to English accurately and simply because it contains a word with multiple meanings, a polysemy. The last two Chinese characters 'Zhong Guo (中国)' can be clearly translated into 'China', but the word 'Yao Qiang (要强)' has many different meanings in the Chinese context, corresponding to different English meanings. One meaning is being eager to excel and anxious to outdo others, generally used to describe a person competitive at work. Another meaning is wanting to be strong and powerful. It is difficult to simply judge which meaning of this polysemy word is more suitable for translation here, because it is more like a combination of these two meanings: China wants to be powerful and desires to excel other countries. Once again, a myth of nationalism and patriotism is reflected clearly.

8.3.2 The introductory post text of Mengniu's ad video

The original Chinese Weibo post text and its English translation are presented as follows.

@蒙牛乳业：她，是德智体美劳全面发展的宝藏少女，是百折不挠生而要强的世界冠军谷爱凌。这个冬天，蒙牛品牌代言人@青蛙公主爱凌 将回到主场，为祖国征

战，让我们一起为她加油吧！#燃动冰雪要强中国# <http://t.cn/A6JXQMfP> (the ad video link).

@Mengniu Dairy: She, Eileen Gu, is a treasure girl with all-round development of morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics, and labour skills. She is also a world champion who is indomitable and born to be enterprising. In this winter, Mengniu's brand endorser @Frog Princess Eileen will return to the home court to fight for the motherland. Let us cheer for her together! #Ran Dong Bing Xue, Yao Qiang Zhong Guo#. <http://t.cn/A6JXQMfP> (the ad video link).

The post text on Mengniu Weibo is an introduction to this video advertisement and can be regarded as linguistic sign. In the first sentence, Eileen Gu is described as an all-round girl who is excellent in all aspects and has an indomitable and enterprising character. The first imply meaning here is that such an outstanding and excellent person has chosen (to endorse) the Mengniu brand, so Mengniu must also have its advantages for being chosen. The emphasis on her character here leads to a second layer of deep meaning, which is that Mengniu and Eileen Gu both have an indomitable and enterprising personality. However, the word 'girl' or 'teenage girl', the Chinese characters 'Shao Nv (少女)' in the original post text, generally refers to young women aged 13 to 17 in their adolescence in China. The term used here to refer to Gu, who is over 18 years old, is not accurate, but can highlight her youth and vitality.

The second sentence denotes Eileen Gu will return to the home court to fight for the motherland this winter. The connotation is Gu will represent the Chinese team in the freestyle skiing competition at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. 'Home court' is the court where the host team plays, and here means Gu regards Beijing as her home court. As a Chinese-American born in the United States, Gu often said in media interviews that Beijing is her home because she frequently came to Beijing to attend cram schools when she was a child, and Chinese medium often called Eileen Gu a 'Beijing girl' or 'Chinese girl' (Chinadaily, 2022).

The original meaning of 'motherland' is the country where you were born or where your family came from, and here means China. Although Gu and her father were both born in the United States, China is actually her mother's motherland where her mother and grandmother were born and grew up. Simply put, Gu refers to her mother's family's birthplace and homeland as her own. Perhaps because she lived in a one-parent family and

was raised by her mother and grandmother instead of her father, she has a closer relationship with her mother both physically and emotionally. This subverts the concept of patrilineal blood as family inheritance in most modern and traditional American and Chinese societies and is more like the concept of family inheritance of matrilineal clan.

Overall, this sentence emphasizes Eileen Gu's representation as a Chinese athlete competing on behalf of the Chinese Olympic team, without mentioning her as a mixed-race and naturalized athlete, even though she is already famous enough that everyone knows her background and experience. All this created a myth of patriotism and nationalism, that is, such an outstanding female athlete chose to become a Chinese and compete for medals and glory for China in the Olympics, which inspired the audience's national self-confidence. Meanwhile, Mengniu sponsored Eileen Gu Ailing, an athlete who worked hard for winning medals for China, so when Mengniu supports Gu, it also supports the Chinese national team in the Olympics, leading to build a patriotic brand image of Mengniu.

‘Let us cheer for her together’ denote to be a call for everyone to cheer for Gu. Considering the connection between Gu and the Beijing 2022 and Gu and Mengniu established in the text above, this sentence cognates and is actually telling everyone that if you support Mengniu, you are supporting Gu and the Chinese Olympics. Therefore, this Weibo post conveys a message to social media users who see it, that is, one way to cheer for Gu is to contribute a like and retweet to this post and spread it.

8.3.3 Repost text of Mengniu’s ad video from Eileen Gu

Eileen Gu's Weibo account then reposted Mengniu’s Weibo post including the ad video with a postscript.

@青蛙公主爱凌: 要强的我们, 准备好要强的登场。这个冬天, 和@蒙牛乳业一起#燃动冰雪要强中国# @蒙牛乳业@牛蒙蒙官方微博

@Frog Princess Eileen: “We, who are ‘Yao Qiang (要强)’, are ready to hit the field strong. In this winter, get together with @ Mengniu Dairy to #Ran Dong Bing Xue, Yao Qiang Zhong Guo(燃动冰雪, 要强中国) #. @ Mengniu Dairy @ Niu Mengmeng official Weibo account” (translated from Chinese into English).

‘This winter’ is mentioned here to implicitly refer to and emphasize the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, because Mengniu as only a personal sponsor of Gu but not an official sponsor of Beijing 2022, is not allowed to directly mention the Olympics or to use its related words or elements, but almost all Chinese consumers know what will happen this winter is the Winter Olympics. When people see the words ‘Eileen Gu’ and ‘this winter’ appearing at the same time, the ongoing Beijing Winter Olympics would naturally and unintentionally come into their brains. This is what Mengniu wants to achieve.

This text posted by Eileen Gu's Weibo account can be seen a self- representation of her. She emphasizes her personality is ‘Yao Qiang (要强)’ which can be explained as competitive, eager to excel and desirable to be strong and powerful as I mentioned before. ‘Yao Qiang (要强)’ as a common personality of Mengniu and Eileen Gu enhance the perceived fit of the sponsorship.

8.4 The Semiotic Analysis of Advertising Film

In this study, the semiotic analysis of the video will be used to examine the meaning that this advertisement conveys. The aim is to discuss how the ad video bridges the target of advertising with advertisers (the Mengniu brand) in conveying implicit meaning and values through visual and verbal texts in the ad. Therefore, in this section, first, I will use a table to present and describe the content of this 30-second advertising video which is divided into 16 scenes, to understand the basic story plot. Then I will select some important and meaningful scenes for semiotic analysis to explore implicit messages conveyed through the signification process in those scenes. Barthes's semiotic method will be applied here to examine the visual, textual, and auditory signs in the video and to look for their denotation, connotation and myth.

8.4.1 The Table of Contents

This advertising video tells the story of Eileen Gu Ailing encountering difficulties while practicing skiing, and finally successfully completing the skiing trick challenge after drinking Mengniu milk. The table of the ad video contents divided in 16 scenes consists of scene number, the description of images, text, and voice. Regarding the sounds in the video, this table only presents the human voice as the narration, and does not describe the background music, soundtrack, and sound effects for each scene. This is because the entire

video uses a background music, a melody played by traditional Chinese musical instruments including bamboo flute and guzheng (plucked zither), and some sound effects of the wind and ski boards scraping on the snow.

Scene	Duration	Images	Text	Voice
1	00:00-0:03	It is an extra-long shot of a skier who is skiing on a snowy mountain and challenging to execute a jump trick in slopestyle but falls to the ground while landing.		
2	00:03-00:06	It is a close-up of the skier standing up from the snowy ground, presenting the head and shoulders of the protagonist, the skier Eileen Gu. Gu wears red ski goggles, a black helmet, a red and white ski suit with a name tag of her English name 'Eileen Gu' on the sleeves, and her hair was tied into double braids. Her facial expression expresses her frustration and unwillingness.		
3	00:07-00:08	It is a medium close-up shot of her walking with a snowboard on her shoulders, taken from the back and side. Five red calligraphy Chinese characters on the right are 'Yao Qiang De Wo Men (要强的我们)'.	White subtitles below are 'Bai Zhe Bu Nao De Wo Men (百折不挠的我们)' meaning 'we are indomitable'.	The same as subtitles in a female voice.
4	00:08-00:10	A close-up shows Eileen Gu drinks a box of Mengniu milk and smiles.	White subtitles below are 'Zhun Bei Hao Yao Qiang Deng Chang Ba (准备好要强登场吧)'.	A female voice is saying 'Zhun Bei Hao Yao Qiang Deng Chang Ba (准备好要强登场吧)'.
5	00:10-00:12	A close-up shows Gu takes a deep breath and puts on her ski goggles again with a pose for being ready to go. On the right are three lines of black Chinese characters that read 'Mengniu (蒙牛)', 'Brand Endorser (品牌代言人)' and 'Gu Ailing (谷爱凌)' respectively. Below it is the handwritten Chinese signature of Gu's Chinese name.	On the left are four red calligraphy Chinese characters 'Yao Qiang Deng Chang (要强登场)'.	

6	00:13-00:14	A medium shot shows Eileen Gu's full body side profile skiing on a gentler slope. The background is relatively short snow-capped mountains		
7	00:14-00:15	An extra-long shot shows Eileen Gu's full body side profile in skiing on a sharp ski slope. The background is relatively high snow-capped mountains.		
8	00:15-00:16	An extra-long shot shows Eileen Gu's full-body frontal profile as she skis down a very steep snow mountain in wild snow (off-piste) areas.		
9	00:16-00:17	A long shot from the back of Eileen Gu shows she is skiing to the high jumping platform.		
10	00:17-00:18	A long shot shows Eileen Gu jumps to the air, making a freestyle ski trick of grabbing her ski board.		
11	00:18-00:21	An animation in the style of ink painting shows a heroine, holding Chinese swords as weapons in both hands in a red and black ancient Chinese costume with a black high ponytail hairstyle, flies to the air while swinging the swords, and then strikes a pose of stabbing out her sword. Four red Chinese characters 'Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (要强中国)' appeared on the right screen.	White subtitles below are 'Huan Xing Xin Zhong De Da Xia, Liang Chu Yao Qiang De Da Zhao (唤醒心中的大侠, 亮出要强的大招)'.	The same as the text in a female voice.
12	00:22-00:23	A full-length shot from the front side shows Gu landing after a freestyle ski trick jump and ski down the snow slope in the front left of the frame until she skis out of the shot.		
13	00:23-00:24	A waist shot low-angle shot shows Gu raising her right fist in a celebratory gesture, with a grin on her face. In the background are rolling snow-capped mountains, and the sun shines between her head and her raised arms.	White subtitles below are 'He Gu Ailing Yi Qi (和谷爱凌一起)', translated to 'Together with Eileen Gu'.	The same as the text in a male voice.
14	00:24-00:26	In the foreground is a row of Mengniu's dairy products, including liquid milk, yogurt, ice cream, milk powder, probiotic drinks, etc. Above it is a line of Chinese characters made into a flame burning effect. The background is snowy fields and snow-	'Ran Dong Bing Xue, Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (燃动冰雪, 要强中国)' in a flame burning effect.	The same as the text in a male voice.

		capped mountains. And there is a dynamic effect of falling snow in the frame.		
15	00:26-00:27	An extra-long shot shows a skier in the distance is skiing to slide an arc on the snow. This arc becomes a part of Mengniu's logo and then the whole logo appears with which this ad video ends.		
16	00:27-00:30	Mengniu's Logo		A male voice is saying: Mengniu.

8.4.2 The signification process

Scene 1 and scene 2: At this denotative level, this scene signifies a woman skiing down a high snow mountain, falling to the ground, shaking her head, and sighing. At this connotative level, this scene signifies that Eileen Gu, a world champion of Freestyle Skiing, skies down the mountain, and after falling on the slope due to a skiing trick error, she shook her head and sighed with the expression on her face showing she is reluctant to give up despite having failed. Certain connotations could be recognized within a culture or by people with certain experiences. Eileen Gu in this shot where is a close-up of her face but no words or language to introduce her identity, is here regarded as a symbolic sign can only be recognized by those who know her appearance, and the connotative meaning can only be interpreted by people who understand her identity. Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology in the form of myth, which has sometimes been described as a third order of signification. Barthes's understanding of myth is the notion of a socially constructed reality. Here, the myth can be interpreted within the ad to be everyone will encounter difficulties and failures in life, and even people as good as world champions are no exception.

Scene 3: Eileen Gu stands up from the ground, then picks up her snowboard. The meaning of voice-over/narrative the bottom subtitles is 'we, who are indomitable'. The connotation here is to emphasize Eileen Gu's "indomitable" spirit and character, because even though she failed in the skiing challenge and fell, she did not give up, but stood up again and packed up her equipment to prepare for another challenge.

This is the first time a human voice appears in this advertising video, saying 'Bai Zhe Bu Nao De Wo Men (百折不挠的我们)', meaning 'we, who are indomitable'. The bottom

subtitles are also the same. However, the five red calligraphy Chinese characters that appear on the right side of the screen show 'Yao Qiang De Wo Men (要强的我们)'. As we have discussed before, 'Yao Qiang (要强)' in Chinese can be interpreted as multiple meanings. Here, the expression in the human voice and the Chinese characters in the screen use seemingly different words, but it is to emphasize: the polysemous word 'Yao Qiang (要强)' here expresses the same meaning of 'Bai Zhe Bu Nao (百折不挠)', which is 'indomitable'.

The red calligraphy Chinese characters emphasises the 'Chineseness' of this scene, which can be seen as a reflection of the Chinese nationalism in this ad, as red (here Chinese red) and Chinese calligraphy are both very typical elements of Chinese culture and Chinese traditions cultural heritage. According to Castelló and Mihelj (2018), symbolic elements highly related to the national culture can be regarded as unofficial national symbols and can evoke people's national identity and nationalist emotions. The font of red calligraphy Chinese characters will continue to be used in many subsequent scenes of this commercial. The nationalist meaning implied by this font will no longer be repeatedly analysed in this chapter but will be discussed combined with other elements in the next section of 'Ideology'.

The voice-over of this sentence is a female voice and uses the first-person pronoun 'we'. This is to make the narration and voice-over closer to the protagonist of the advertisement, Eileen Gu, in an attempt to make the audience feel that it is Gu's own voice or thoughts. Based on Perucha (2009), first person narratives tend to emphasise the main character's interaction with the advertised commodity, so the use of 'we' here attempts to make the audience more convinced that Eileen Gu is using Mengniu products. Additionally, first-person narration could boost the user's motivation of social belonging (Chang et al., 2019). Using "we" is to make the audience feel that the audiences and Eileen Gu can belong to the same social group and have the same "indomitable" spirit and character. This may increase the audience's identification with the protagonist of the advertisement and be more likely to believe the opinions conveyed by the advertisement.

Scene 4: Eileen Gu holding a carton of milk, makes a motion of sipping through a straw, and then smiles. The denotative meaning of this scene is that the protagonist in the commercial takes a sip of milk and smiles. The connotation is that world champion Eileen Gu drinks Mengniu milk and smiles with satisfaction. Based on the context, this connotation is to highlight that it is Mengniu milk that can give Eileen Gu energy and help her prepare for the next challenge after failure. In addition, the smile is generally a facial expression that

reflect positive moods and attitudes such as happiness, satisfaction, and liking. Therefore, another connotation that advertisers want to convey to the audience here can be that Gu Eileen is happy and satisfied to drink Mengniu milk and really like it, leading to a potential association in consumers' minds that perhaps Gu feels Mengniu milk is delicious or can help her have more energy to improve her skiing.

In this scene, Eileen Gu's profile faces the camera, while the Mengniu milk carton held by her right hand from the bottom of the carton is positioned frontally towards the camera. This is not a natural posture for holding the milk carton when drinking milk. Typically, when drinking milk from a carton with a straw, one would orient the front of the carton towards oneself, rather than holding it sideways as Gu does in the scene. And we normally hold the milk carton in the middle instead of the bottom because it is more stable. This unnatural milk-drinking posture is adopted on purpose to showcase the most iconic, distinctive, and easily recognizable product information such as the product name (pure milk), brand name (Mengniu), and brand logo printed on the front of the carton, directly to the camera, without being blocked by the hand. The second unnatural point is that what is shown in the shot is only the scene of the straw leaving Gu's lips, but no obvious facial movements of 'sucking' the straw or swallowing movements. Therefore, Gu may not have actually taken a sip of milk here, but she was just pretending to drink milk, making the audience think she really drank it.

Scene 5: Eileen Gu takes a deep breath and puts on her ski goggles again. These movements are all preparation poses for skiing, implying that Eileen Gu is ready to challenge again. The narrative and subtitle are 'get ready to hit the field stronger'. There are four red Chinese characters on the left side of the screen presents 'hit the field stronger'. This scene is the first time in the advertising video that a close-up of Gu's face is shown frontally facing the camera. The previous ones were all from the side. Four lines of black printed Chinese characters appear on the right side of the screen, clearly showing the name of the protagonist in this video and the name of the brand. The purpose is to emphasize Eileen Gu's identity as the brand endorser of Mengniu. Combined with the context, the connotation of this scene is that Mengniu Milk is helping its brand endorser, world champion Eileen Gu, prepare for the skiing challenge.

From top to bottom, the four lines of Chinese characters on the right side are: in the first line, '蒙牛(Mengniu)', which is the Chinese character for the brand name; in the second

line, '品牌代言人 (Pin Pai Dai Yan Ren)', which can be translated as Brand Endorser; on the third line, '谷爱凌(Gu Ailing)', Eileen Gu's name in Chinese characters; on the fourth line, Eileen Gu's signature in Chinese characters, a small English name signature in the lower right corner, and a small heart symbol in the upper right corner. Here, Gu's name and signature are written in Chinese with her Chinese name instead of her English name. This is not only to make the Chinese audience understand, but also to emphasize her 'Chineseness', and weaken her mixed-race identity.

The subtitles and narration at this time are 'Zhun Bei Hao Yao Qiang Deng Chang Ba (准备好要强登场吧)', which can be directly translated in to 'Get ready to Yao Qiang (要强) hit the field'. There are four red calligraphy Chinese characters that appear on the left side of the screen showing 'Yao Qiang Deng Chang(要强登场)', directly translated in to 'Yao Qiang (要强) hit the field'. As can be seen that the word 'Yao Qiang (要强)' appears again, but here the word is used as an adverb to modify 'hit the field'. Because of the polysemy of this word and the differences between Chinese and English, it is difficult to find a completely accurate word to translate this sentence. Unlike 'Yao Qiang (要强)' in Scene 3 which means 'indomitable', the more appropriate and contextual meaning here should be 'want to be stronger'. Therefore, this sentence can be translated as: 'get ready to hit the field stronger'.

Scene 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10: Scene 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10: The following video shows a person skiing on the ski run fluently, then jumping and skiing on off-piste slopes from the high snow mountain nimbly, and finally reaching the Big Air platform to complete a ski trick. The connotation is Eileen Gu successfully completes the challenge and achieves the success of her classic switch tail grab trick after drinking Mengniu milk. The myth here could be that (Mengniu) milk can help us complete challenges and achieve success in life.

Another underlying meaning can be seen judging from the time when this advertisement was popular. This advertisement was released before the Winter Olympics, but its popularity reached its peak during the 2022 Winter Olympics, especially when Eileen Gu represented the Chinese national team in the Olympic freestyle skiing competition winning the gold medal at Big Air with her classic switch tail grab trick. By imitating and recreating Gu's competition scenes of her grab trick at the Beijing 2022, this advertisement attempts to imply that Mengniu milk helped Eileen Gu achieve success in the 2022 Winter Olympics. Therefore, another meaning of this scene that can be interpreted on the other side is that

Mengniu helps and supports the Chinese Olympic Games because Mengniu milk helps a Chinese Olympian win more Olympic medals for China. This is the effect that Mengniu's ambush marketing wants to achieve – to mislead consumers recognizing Mengniu as the official Olympic sponsor. It is a common and useful ambush marketing method to create a closer association in audiences' minds of Eileen Gu's image and actions in the advertisement with their memory of the Olympic Games through some Olympic-related symbols and signs, which will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter.

Scene 11: This scene is an animation inserted here from seconds 19 to 22 of this video when a cartoon image of the heroine in an ancient Chinese martial arts movie occurs. In this scene, a heroine, holding swords as weapons in both hands in a red and black ancient Chinese costume with a black high ponytail hairstyle, flies to the air and swings the swords in the air drawing a sword flower. When she strikes a pose of stabbing out her Chinese sword, the subtitles and narration are 'Huan Qi Ni Xin Zhong De Ying Xiong, Liang Chu Ni Yao Qiang De Da Zhao (唤起你心中的英雄, 亮出你要强的大招)', which can be clearly translated into 'Awaken the hero in your heart and bring out your powerful big attack'. At the same time, four red calligraphy Chinese characters 'Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (要强中国)' appeared on the screen, which means 'China wants to be strong'. This scene animates Gu's image, turning her skiing on the field into fighting on the battlefield, and transfers her image from a mere skier into be a Chinese female warrior who fights for her country like Mulan in Chinese folk tales--- which is the connotative meaning of this scene.

This advertisement intends to convey the message that Eileen Gu is a national heroine through the metaphor of Eileen Gu to Mulan, by visually referring to the allusion of 'Mulan' story here. However, based on Chandler (1994)'s concept of intertextuality that each text exists in relation to others, audience should have necessary experience to make sense of allusions and to feel the pleasure of recognition. Therefore, audiences should know the story of Mulan first and then they can receive the hint of the image of Eileen Gu and Mulan as a 'heroine fighting for the country'. The legend of Mulan is originated from the Ballad of Mulan in the Northern Wei, a dynasty ruling northern China between the 4th and the 6th centuries CE (Wang, 2021). The Mulan Ballad tells the story of a young nomadic girl in northern ancient China who disguises herself as a young man to undergo military training and to join the war in place of her frail and elderly father for protecting her country; finally she makes a great military exploit, but she refuses the emperor's reward for her official position, and

chooses to return to her hometown to live with her families. This story from this ballad has since been interpreted into many versions in various film and television works, but the three key points of Mulan's disguising herself as a man, joining the army on her father's behalf, and defeating the enemies who invaded her country constitute the main line of the story and have not changed. The word 'Mulan' is even the representative and symbol of 'heroine' in China. Therefore, the attempt to build the image of Eileen Gu as a national heroine who fighting for the country reflects a strong Chinese nationalist sentiment in this ad, especially combined with the subtitles and narration here.

When most Chinese audiences watch this animation in the ad, they should easily think of Mulan, because they are familiar with the story of Mulan, and the screen image in the advertisement is very consistent with the image of Mulan in their minds. 'Mulan' is a household name in China, just as the story of King Arthur is very popular in England. The reasons for the popularity and being famous of 'Mulan' are this story has not only been widely circulated among the people since ancient China, Ballad of Mulan has also been selected into the Chinese language and literature textbooks for all the middle schools in China since the 1950s. Therefore, every Chinese person who has received compulsory education in China must recite it in order to pass the high school entrance examination.

This animated image of a heroine fighting with swords is more like the visual image of 'Mulan' than that of Eileen Gu herself. The classic visual image of the character Mulan in the minds of Chinese people is a young female warrior with long black hair holding a Chinese sword and wearing a red and black cloth. This classic image of Mulan has been constructure and portrayed by many Chinese and English film and television works based on this story, especially three movies titled 'Mulan' including a 2009 mainland Chinese movie, a 1998 Disney animated movie, and a 2020 Disney movie. For example, in a live-action film adaptation of Disney's 1998 animated film of Mulan released in 2020, the heroine Mulan played by superstar Chinese-American actress Liu Yifei appeared in the classic Mulan image described above (Sinuraya et al., 2022). As can be seen, the image of the animated heroine in this Mengniu commercial looks more like the classic Mulan image in movies with the high similarity of their hair colour, weapons, and ancient clothing style, than Eileen Gu who has brown hair and modern clothing. Therefore, when viewers see the animation in this Mengniu advertisement, they are likely to associate it with the image of Mulan in the movie because of these similar symbols. However, Eileen Gu appears in the scenes before and after this animation in the ad and the introductory text of the ad highlighted this ad is centred around

Gu, so audiences can understand this is the metaphor of Eileen Gu to Mulan, and they can also connect the images of Gu and Mulan in the film. In addition, animator Tony Bancroft, also the director of the animated movie *Mulan* (1998), drew a set of 2D animations for Eileen Gu to show his like of Gu after watching her winning three medals during the Beijing 2022, and said "Eileen Gu is a strong female hero like Mulan". The video of this set of animations was posted by Tony Bancroft on the biggest Chinese social media Weibo and was forwarded by many Chinese official media, with more than 500,000 views. Hence, if the audience has seen this video, their psychological associations between Eileen Gu and Mulan would be strengthened.

Besides the visual connection, this advertisement also attempts to connect the personalities and good qualities of Eileen Gu and Mulan and promote the "Mulan spirit" of Chinese women symbolized by Gu. The term of 'Mulan Spirit' was used by China's official media Xinhua News Agency to describe outstanding women in the new era as brave, strong, righteous, and intelligent (Xinhuanet.com., 2022). In the traditional folk tale *The Mulan Ballad* under the Confucianism narrative, Mulan is portrayed and highlighted as a filial daughter who is strong and patriotic, and successful in military exploits but finally gives up fame or wealth and goes back to her family; while in the live-action film *Mulan* 2022 under the neoliberal feminist narrative where Mulan is powerful, brave, talented, hard-working, and smart, and finally becomes a military leader achieving career success (Wang, 2021). Based on Eileen Gu's personal image and experience, she is like a fusion of the heroine Mulan from the two versions of the story. First, in any version of Mulan's story, Mulan is a strong and brave woman, very capable, patriotic (fighting for her country), and finally achieves career success (making military exploits), and so does Gu who is a world champion in freestyle skiing. In addition, the combination of traditional Chinese virtues in the old story and neoliberal feminist spirit in the new story can be reflected from Gu. On the one hand, she is so filial because she respects, loves, and takes care of her mother and grandmother. For example, Eileen Gu said in an interview that her skiing dream came from her mother, and one of the reasons why she represented China in the ski competition was to help her mother realize her dream (Beijing Daily., 2022). This is somewhat similar to Mulan's reason for joining the army on her father's behalf as mentioned above. On the other hand, Eileen Gu is intelligent in her profession and strives to pursue her dreams and career development, never giving up, just like what Mulan was and did in the film *Mulan* 2022.

Therefore, the animation and the metaphor of Eileen Gu to Mulan used in this ad can reflect three ideologies. The first is the Chinese nationalism, highlighting that Eileen Gu competed in freestyle skiing on behalf of China at the Beijing 2022 is fighting for her country like Mulan as a Chinese female warrior, and she won the medals for Chinese national team could be seen as a national heroine winning the glory for the country. The Chinese nationalist ideology is also strengthened by the traditional Chinese ink painting style and Chinese calligraphy fonts which both symbolize Chinese classical aesthetics and traditional culture. The second ideology is post-feminism, emphasizing individualism, choice, and empowerment (Budgeon, 2011). This post-feminist ideology needs to be depicted and conveyed in the context of the conjunction with the entire advertisement and Eileen Gu's background and personal experience, so it will be explained and analysed in detail in the next chapter. Despite this, in this animation scene of just a few seconds, what still can be seen is a powerful, brave and aggressive female image as a warrior holding her weapons. The third ideology here could be the myth of milk as a perfect food which helps people become stronger and more successful just like Eileen Gu in the ad film who becomes a powerful warrior after drinking Mengniu milk.

Scene 13: This scene shows Eileen Gu successfully completing the ski trick, and then raising her right fist after landing. The gesture of raising a clenched fist is often seen both within and outside sports to communicate success or to function in self-encouragement or the encouragement of others (Tops & De Jong, 2006). Here, Eileen Gu raises the right fist to celebrate and express her joy at successfully challenging a skiing trick. The subtitles and narration are 'He Gu Ai Ling Yi Qi (和谷爱凌一起)', meaning 'Together with Eileen Gu'. The linguistic signs here echo 'Fight with Eileen Gu together' in the Weibo post. It is worth noting that the voice-over here has changed to a male voice. If the previous female voice-over and the use of the first-person pronoun "we" strengthen the audience's feeling that these words are said by Eileen Gu and these views are what Gu herself wants to convey, the male voice with a strong sense of contrast now intends the audience to escape this feeling, expressing that it is not Eileen Gu who is speaking. Based on Cook (1994), advertising has typically a persuasive function, and can also aim at pleading or seeking support. The voice-over here is like another person calling on the audience to be together with Gu and support her.

Scene 14: In the next scene, in the background picture of a snow mountain, Mengniu's ten signature products, including room-temperature liquid milk, milk powder, yogurt, ice cream, and probiotic drinks, appear below the screen. On the bottom of the screen is the

slogan consisting of eight Chinese characters that have been made into special effects of flame burning, ‘Ran Dong Bing Xue, Yao Qiang Zhong Guo 燃动冰雪, 要强中国’. This slogan has been translated and explained when it was mentioned above as ‘Burning ice and snow, China wants to be powerful and desires to excel’. This scene shows a series of Mengniu dairy products and conveys a connotation to the audience that although Eileen Gu only drinks one of Mengniu’s products (Ultra High-Temperature liquid milk) in this advertising video, Mengniu also has many other dairy products which are all also related to Gu and helpful for her. Combined with the slogan which is full of patriotic spirit, the nationalist myth that Mengniu’s milk products and brand supports the development of Winter sports and the Olympic Games in China has been enhanced.

Scene 15 & 16: The last scene is when a skier in the distance slides an arc on the snow, and then Mengniu’s logo appears with which this ad video ends. The denotation can be this arc left by a skier on the snow forms part of Mengniu’s logo. Integrating skiing into a part of Mengniu's LOGO connotes that the sport of skiing is closely related to the Mengniu brand.

8.5 The ideologies of Mengniu’s ad

8.5.1 Chinese nationalism

Haas (1986:709) defined nationalism as 'the convergence of territorial and political loyalty irrespective of competing foci of affiliation, such as kinship, profession, religion, economic interest, race, or even language'. All nationalisms imply a principle of identity based on impersonal ties, remote ties, vicarious ties—all of which are mediated by a set of common symbols embedded in a certain pattern of communication. In this advertisement, the characters 'Zhong Guo 中国' (China) repeatedly appear, including in the theme and slogan of this marketing campaign, the introductory text on Weibo, and the textual elements, subtitles, and voiceovers in the video advertisements. Emphasizing national symbols is a manifestation of nationalist propaganda, and the name of the country is a typical official national symbol (Castelló and Mihelj, 2018). The slogan of this marketing campaign by Mengniu is ‘Ran Dong Bing Xue (燃动冰雪), Yao Qiang Zhong Guo (要强中国)’, meaning ‘burning ice and snow, China wants to be powerful and excellent’. Slogans usually simplify complicated ideas and reflect the ideology and goals of a certain group (Kim, 2011). Slogans serve the function

of creating identity, and here, Mengniu aims to underscore its identity and mission as a supporter of the development of 'Chinese winter sports'.

This advertisement also reflects the sense of national pride created by athletes through their sporting achievements by emphasizing Eileen Gu as a Chinese athlete who won Olympic gold medals for China, and by metaphoring Gu to the national heroine Mulan. As analysed earlier, this Mengniu advertisement successfully employs ambush marketing by recreating Gu's image on the Olympic stage in the minds of the audience. Simultaneously, it also evokes the audience's sense of national pride and honour when they saw Gu won gold medals for the Chinese national team. China's sport celebrities have played their part in nation building and identity construction (Lu & Fan, 2021). Therefore, by using Eileen Gu, who embodies both the Mengniu endorser and the identity of a Chinese Olympic champion, as an intermediary, the audience is likely to associate Mengniu with national pride, especially given Mengniu's support for the development of Chinese winter sports that they have implied in the slogan. In addition, Mengniu's successful metaphorical portrayal of Eileen Gu as a national heroine defending the country, akin to Mulan, is due to the fact that modern sports events are inherently simulations of war, and in the minds of the Chinese people, China's sporting heroes can also bring pride and honour to the nation (Lu & Fan, 2021). However, based on Brubaker (2004), in some settings, 'nation' is imagined as an ethnocultural community distinct from the citizenry of the state. When 'nation' is imagined in this way, nationalism can be internally as well as externally exclusive, for it can define some fellow residents, even fellow citizens, as outsiders to, perhaps even enemies of, the nation. As a naturalized athlete, Eileen Gu can be accepted and recognized as a 'Chinese' or 'Chinese athlete' and can represent national pride in people's minds, because of her consistent advocacy of her Chinese identity in the media leading up to the Beijing 2022. She has expressed her identification with being Chinese, considers Beijing her hometown, and demonstrates a fondness for Chinese culture.

Nationalism is closely intertwined with the cultural identity of a nation (Jamil & Tafifah, 2019). In this advertisement, numerous elements of Chinese culture are presented as unofficial national symbols, awakening the audience's sense of national identity during the viewing process. For example, as previously mentioned and analysed, there are various traditional Chinese cultural elements such as Chinese calligraphy fonts, ink painting animation styles imbued with classical Chinese aesthetics, allusions to Chinese folk tale

(Mulan), and the use of the Chinese language, including Chinese characters and Mandarin narration.

Additionally, it is worth discussing how the use of colours in this advertisement reflects the values of Chinese nationalism within national culture. The colour at different cultural backgrounds can reflect in the different cultural connotation. In this video, red emerges as a potent semiotic marker of Chinese cultural identity and nationalism. Eileen Gu's ski suit and ski goggles, and the Chinese calligraphic characters that appear on the video screen are also red. This ad uses a lot of red, not only because the red colour is the strongest one of all kinds of colours for the person's eyes and brains, thus more likely to attracting consumers' attention and making an impression, but also as this colour has an important cultural connotation in China (He, 2009). In many cultures, red generally symbolises fire, meaning danger or dangerous because the fire can hurt. This is why the red colour is used as a stop signal in modern traffic lights. In contrast, in China, red has commendatory connotation known popularly, standing for the joyous meaning, good luck, happiness, prosperous, and success. For example, in a traditional Chinese wedding and Chinese Spring Festival, people should dress in red, and hang the red lanterns. Red is also used on honour rolls, award certificates and medal strings to symbolize success in China. However, it is worthy of noting that in certain contexts, red is the symbol of the death in China. For instant, when prisoners are sentenced to death, their names would be circled in red, and their clothes are always in red to show their low position as a prisoner and his crime. Although red also has some negative symbolic meanings, the red colour has been still considered the national colour of China and there is a term of red colour in Chinese language named 'China Red'. Hence, as can be seen, red is the most important colour and the favourite colour for the Chinese people from the ancient time until now, which can become a typical cultural symbol of Chinese people's collective national identity.

On the other hand, historically, red also represented communism. For example, the paranoia about the internal Communist threat was normally called the Red Scare. Moreover, the national flag of the People's Republic of China is known as the Five-star Red Flag, where the red represents the Chinese Communist Revolution and the five stars and their relationships to each other represent the unity of the Chinese people under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Therefore, when Mengniu uses a large amount of red in the video, it reminds the Chinese consumers of the national cultural tradition of the love for red since

ancient times, and of the association with the national flag of New China, leading to a sense of national pride in them.

8.5.2 Gender ideologies

The advertisement depicts Eileen Gu's perseverance in overcoming challenges and ultimately achieving success in her career (skiing), framing her as a role model to encourage women to strive for personal success and self-fulfilment. This ad reflects the postmodern feminist ideology, through embodying characteristics of empowerment and self-determination for women, and challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Baker, 2010).

The ad portrays milk as a sport drink that can enhance athletic performance, aiding Eileen Gu in successfully completing skiing challenges. It attempts to encourage young women and athletes to consume milk to improve their athletic abilities or increase energy and become stronger. Those who see this advertisement and want to purchase Mengniu milk may think, 'I admire women like Eileen Gu who are diligent, resilient, and ultimately achieve success through their own efforts, so drinking the same brand of milk may help me become a person like her.' Such perspectives will be mentioned and further explained in details in the consumer interview analysis in the next Chapter. This representation aligns with the postmodern feminist notion of women's autonomy in consumer choices (Lazar, 2009). By encouraging young women to consume milk for her self's health and strength, the advertisement challenges traditional notions of femininity tied to domesticity and caregiving roles as mentioned below.

The image and portrayal of woman in this advertisement breaks away from the traditional image and stereotype of a woman as a 'mother' who is always preparing milk for children seen in many classic Chinese milk advertisements. For example, in a Yili Dairy' advertisement film in the topic of the countdown to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, Yang Yang, a former Chinese short-track speed skater and Olympic champion, pours a glass of Yili milk for her son as breakfast before he going to school, emphasizing her nurturing role as a mother rather than as an athlete or Olympic champion. As Cuneen and Spencer (2003) point out, sport-themed ads often portray females as inactive, fragile, non-athletic, traditionally feminine or even sexual, and engaged in leisure activities or individual sports rather than in competitive or team sports. However, in this Mengniu advertising film, the woman (Eileen

Gu) is no longer portrayed as a 'mother' but as a strong and successful female figure, transformed into 'female athlete' or even 'female hero'. In addition, the woman in this ad no longer prepares the milk for children but drinks the milk for herself. This shift breaking away from stereotypical gender roles, reflects the postmodern feminist perspective on women's agency in self-consumption and self-representation (Nathanson, 2014).

In conclusion, Mengniu Dairy's advertisement featuring Eileen Gu exemplifies the empowerment of women in advertising through a post-feminist lens. By depicting women as resilient, successful individuals and promoting autonomy in consumption choices, the advertisement challenges traditional gender norms and empowers women to pursue their aspirations. This analysis underscores the evolving landscape of feminist discourse in advertising and its implications for gender representation and empowerment in media.

8.6 The myth of Milk

While many cultural theorists regard Mythologies as foundational to contemporary cultural studies (Easthope, 1991: 140; Storey, 1993: 77; Stivale, 2002: 458), a similar claim may be made in relation to contemporary advertising studies. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin sought to understand advertising as a distinct social phenomenon, observing that advertising media plays a crucial role in the creation of myths through the production and circulation of social symbols (Слюсар, 2021). Roland Barthes contends that cultural materials are deliberately constructed to shape public consciousness and reinforce bourgeois ideology. In the process of signification, myth operates by transforming culturally and historically specific elements into signs that appear natural and universal (Al-Kadi & Alzoubi, 2023). As a result, culturally contingent products come to signify meanings beyond their intrinsic value. These new mythic signs obscure the socio-historical conditions and cultural mechanisms that originally produced them.

These two chapters examine the “myths” embedded in two milk advertisements featuring athletes as protagonists, and explores the ideological messages they propagate. It will identify the mythic signs that have emerged through the process of signification—signs that are increasingly perceived as “natural” and “universal” within contemporary Chinese media discourse. Furthermore, it seeks to deconstruct these signs by revealing the cultural mechanisms through which such transformations have occurred.

Cow's milk has acquired widespread cultural significance across many societies as "nature's perfect food" (Eisen et al., 2020). In the United States, for example, nutritional authorities have lauded milk as "indispensable" and "the most complete food," due to its associations with wholesomeness and bodily development (DuPuis, 2002). This idealised image is further reinforced in both Yili and Mengniu's Olympic-themed commercials, which promote milk as instrumental in enhancing athletic performance and achieving sporting success.

Both advertisements follow similar narrative arcs, whereby athletes improve their physical abilities following the consumption of milk. In Mengniu's commercial, Eileen Gu is shown succeeding at a skiing manoeuvre that she previously failed, implicitly attributing her improvement to drinking milk. Likewise, in Yili's commercial, Wu Dajing is portrayed surpassing his own previous performance after drinking milk, while Liu Jiayu is shown relaxing with milk after overcoming multiple training challenges, suggesting its role in post-exercise recovery. Collectively, these advertisements construct a narrative wherein milk is not merely nutritious, but actively supports physical strength, speed, and resilience—effectively repositioning milk from a traditional nutritional supplement to a functional sports beverage.

Beneath the mythic sign of "milk as a perfect food" lie two key ideological undercurrents: meritocracy and nationalism. To critically unpack this myth, one must ask: why is there a desire to enhance performance and health? According to the narratives constructed in the advertisements, the motivations are dual: first, Eileen Gu's improvement is portrayed as a pathway to individual excellence and national glory at the 2022 Beijing Olympics, aligning with Mengniu's slogan "China must be excellent." Similarly, Wu Dajing and Liu Jiayu aim to excel not only for personal achievement but also to honour their country, as Yili's branding emphasises national representation. Thus, milk is not only positioned as a tool for personal advancement but also as a symbolic agent of collective national pride.

These ideological associations are far from confined to advertising. In modern Chinese media and public discourse, the milk myth and its attendant ideologies have been extensively propagated and naturalised. As Andrews and Silk (2018) and Hearn (2021) argue, elite sports globally are intertwined with the myth of meritocracy. In China, this narrative intersects with nationalism. Cow's milk, heavily promoted by the state as a symbol of national health, features prominently in public campaigns such as "A glass of milk every day, Chinese people stronger day by day" and "A glass of milk strengthens a nation" (Hu, 2020;

Wiley, 2013). These slogans, often echoed in official media, exemplify how milk has been co-opted into China's broader narrative of national rejuvenation.

To grasp why milk holds significance beyond mere sustenance in China, it is necessary to consider its cultural positioning. Unlike in Western contexts, where milk is often consumed with coffee, tea, or cereal, in China milk is usually drunk on its own. According to the *2024 Report on Chinese Residents' Nutrition Knowledge and Health Behaviours*, over 45% of Chinese people consume milk directly, while only 21.3% of young adults mix it with tea or coffee. High-quality tea is traditionally consumed without additives, and adding milk is often viewed as spoiling its essence. By contrast, in the UK, 48% of milk is used in tea, 28% in coffee, and 28% on cereal (AHDB, 2021). These patterns reflect cultural distinctions in how milk is conceptualised: in China, it is less a taste-enhancing beverage and more a functional health product.

Despite over a century of exposure, milk has not become an integral part of everyday life for most Chinese citizens. According to the *2021 China Dairy Industry Index Report*, only around 360 million Chinese people consume dairy daily, leaving over a billion without the habit. Cultural resistance, rooted in millennia of dietary practice, appears to override both scientific recommendations and political messaging. While China has embraced many Western practices, milk consumption—symbolic of modernity, foreignness, and capitalism—remains unevenly adopted. Even today, products like cheese have yet to find widespread acceptance on Chinese tables.

Milk thus remains coded as a health supplement rather than a leisurely drink. For Chinese consumers, milk serves a function: to help children grow taller and smarter, support young adults' energy and strength, and protect elderly individuals against osteoporosis. These health-based functions are widely invoked in marketing discourse. Under sustained promotion by both state and commercial actors, milk has been mythologised as a medicalised beverage—consumed not for enjoyment, but for anticipated physiological benefit. As a result, individuals often only consume milk when concerned about their health, rather than as a daily dietary staple.

In sum, milk in China has been reconstituted as a symbol of health, rather than flavour or indulgence. Its role as a cultural signifier has evolved into a modern myth—one sustained by ideological frameworks of meritocracy and nationalism, and propagated by commercial branding and state narratives alike.

9. Nationalism through the Semiotic Lens: A Focus Group Analysis of the Beijing 2022 Olympics and Sponsorship

9.1 Introduction

In his seminal 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes posits that “the death of the author is the birth of the reader”, thereby asserting that meaning does not reside in authorial intent but rather emerges through the interpretative engagement of the reader (Barthes, 2016). This post-structuralist perspective challenges structuralism’s earlier emphasis on stable, internal meaning within texts, advocating instead for a multiplicity of interpretations shaped by readers’ socio-cultural contexts. In the preceding chapter, the researcher adopted a semiotic approach to decode two Olympic-themed milk advertisements—one by Yili and the other by Mengniu—revealing the ideological messages encoded by advertisers, including themes of nationalism, gender, and meritocracy. These readings were necessarily filtered through the researcher’s subjectivity as an interpretative reader.

This chapter extends the analysis by exploring how meanings are constructed not solely by the researcher but also by other readers—in this case, participants in a focus group study. In doing so, it acknowledges the fluid and contested nature of meaning-making as articulated by post-structuralist theory. The concept of the “interpretive horizon” becomes salient here, as the focus group members—positioned as active readers—bring their own cultural frames and lived experiences to the process of interpretation.

Semiotics, broadly defined as “the study of the social production of meaning generated from sign systems” (O’Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 281), provides a valuable methodological framework for the analysis of soft qualitative data (White, 2018). Within this study, semiotic analysis will be applied to transcripts of focus group discussions. A thematic analysis will first be conducted to categorise responses under key ideological domains—most notably nationalism and gender. Subsequently, a semiotic reading of these themes will uncover the underlying structures and symbolic associations within participants’ responses.

Central to this method is the role of the reader. As posited by Umberto Eco (1981), meaning is not passively received but actively constructed through the interplay between the text (or message) and the reader’s cultural codes. Thus, during the focus group discussions, participants may reveal meanings that were latent or overlooked in the earlier advertisement

analysis. Their interpretations can offer alternative or even contradictory readings of the same visual texts, thereby enriching the ideological critique.

The focus group discussion centres on Olympic sponsorship and athlete endorsement, with participants being invited to share their views on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and their perceptions of the advertisements and the two milk brands after viewing the promotional films. Given the open-ended nature of the questioning, it is expected that participants will not only comment on the advertisements themselves but may also draw upon broader aspects of consumer culture and lifestyle practices.

Within the semiotic framework adopted in this study, the responses generated by interviewees are conceptualised as "messages"—comprising signs that are encoded by speakers and decoded by receivers in dynamic and culturally situated ways (Sebeok, 2001). Importantly, meaning does not reside innately within these signifying messages, but is produced in the act of interpretation, influenced by the ideological positioning and lived experience of the interpreter (Hall, 2000). This dual theoretical positioning—drawing from structuralism's concern with the regularities of cultural meaning systems, and post-structuralism's focus on the instability and multiplicity of signs—enables an exploration of how dominant ideologies are internalised, contested, or rearticulated by audiences.

The next two chapters focus on two primary ideological themes that emerged from the focus group data: nationalism and gender. In this chapter, the first theme—nationalism—was particularly salient in participants' reflections on the Olympics, the role of national athletes, and corporate sponsorship, as well as their interpretations of the two advertisement films. Drawing on Conversi's (2010) definition, nationalism may be understood as an ideological movement that articulates itself in the name of a self-defined nation, typically with the aim of asserting control over political institutions within a delimited territorial space. In the context of this study, nationalism is expressed not only through overt political discourse but also through symbolic attachments, emotional responses, and cultural references encoded in consumer narratives.

This chapter critically investigates the ways in which nationalism is constructed, performed, and interpreted within the semiotic landscape of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Drawing on focus group data and grounded in semiotic and poststructuralist theory, it explores how national identity, emotion, and symbolic representations—both official and cultural—are encoded in Olympic advertisements and decoded by audiences. To

facilitate a more systematic analysis, the theme of nationalism has been categorised into the following categories (sub-themes):

- National Identity and Language: Us vs. Them
- Emotions: National Pride and Xenophobia
- National Symbols: Official Symbols and Cultural Symbols

Each sub-theme will be interrogated through a semiotic and ideological framework, with the aim of uncovering how nationalism is symbolically embedded, enacted, and interpreted within the discursive constructions of young Chinese consumers in the post-Reform era. In this context, the study adopts a semiotic lens to explore how dominant ideological formations—particularly those relating to nationalism and gender—are variously reproduced, contested, or reconfigured by a specific demographic: local Chinese consumers in early adulthood (defined here as aged 17 to 45; Aktu & İlhan, 2017), situated within the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary Mainland China following the 1978 Reform and Opening-Up.

9.2 National Identity and Language: Us vs. Them

Smith (2002: 15) defines the nation as a named community possessing ‘a historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs.’ plays a central role in enacting ideology and establishing ideological consciousness (Billig, 2005). Turns of phrases and linguistic forms, particularly the nuanced use of personal pronouns, such as the use of personal pronouns like "we" and "they/other," as instances of banal nationalism, signify national identity and highlight distinctions between self and others.

Metonymy, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 36) describe, ‘allows us to use one entity to stand for another’, strengthening the symbolic ties between language and national identity. In focus groups, participants often substituted "we" or "us" to signify "China" or "the Chinese people," evident in phrases as shown below:

"We hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics..."(Group 1, speaker 5; Group 2, speaker 1)

"We organised the Games..."(Group 1, speaker 3; Group 4, speaker 3)

"In the torch-lighting ceremony, we used snowflakes coming together from all directions to form a large snowflake... Whether it was the opening or closing ceremony, we put a lot of thought into it." (Group 4, speaker 3)

In these examples, the denotation is China or Chinese people host or organised the Games. Although it was the Chinese Olympic Committee and its staff who organised the Games and designed the opening ceremony, the speakers—merely spectators with no direct involvement—used phrases like "we hosted the Olympics" without being questioned in the focus groups. It was because of their strong sense of identity as Chinese, leading them to feel a shared connection with the Olympic organising committee. This linguistic pattern represents a classic case of metonymy, where speakers use a part (themselves as citizens) to represent the whole (the nation or its official bodies), aligning with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) notion of metonymy as a cognitive tool that links closely related concepts.

Despite having no directly personal involvement, participants expressed a sense of ownership and collective identity with the Olympic organisers. Such metonymic substitutions not only function at a linguistic level but also reveal deeper structures of collective identification. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of nation as 'imagined communities', the use of "we" reflects the speakers' sense of belonging to a collective—identifying themselves as part of the broader Chinese nation. Whether as spectators or Olympic Committee staff, both groups are members of China's "imagined community" and are naturally referred to as "we". Thus, these interviewees were unsurprising and natural to use "we" or hear others' use this word when discussing the hosting and organisation of the Olympics, without specifically mentioning the Olympic Committee staff.

Moreover, interviewees regularly used "our" to substitute "China's" or "Chinese," as seen in references like "our country" or "our national teams". For example:

"Our country can host the Winter Olympics at this moment (pandemic), I believe, has enhanced national confidence in some way." (Group 3, speaker 2)

Here, "our" is a metonym for "Chinese people's", signalling the Chinese people's collective ownership, indicating the speaker's identity as part of the national community. Through such linguistic choices, participants assign their achievements to China's accomplishments, generating a sense of collective pride and resilience.

When the word "our" is used in conjunction with other words instead of "country", it is still a metonymy of "Chinese people's" which is a bit more obscure, but it is also a common language habit that is easily accepted by native Chinese speakers.

"Some of our volunteers' uniforms at Beijing Winter Olympic Games were very attractive, incorporating classical elements into the design—this is our new creation.....Our director, Zhang Yimou, utilised elements of our Chinese culture in the Olympics closing ceremony....." (Group 1, speaker 5)

"Short track speed skating is an event I followed closely throughout, and I think our national teams really had to work hard." (Group 3, speaker 4)

The pronoun "our" further represents entities that extend beyond individual affiliation yet denote a shared cultural identity. Statements like "Our volunteers' uniforms incorporated classical elements" and "Our director, Zhang Yimou, used our culture" underscore this identification, with "our" extending to encompass 'shared cultural elements' (Smith, 2002: 15) and national symbols associated with Chinese identity. Such usage reflects a naturalized language habit among native Chinese speakers, reflecting and also in turn subtly reinforcing the collective identity and imagined community of China.

When referring to a performance designed using classical allusions at the opening ceremony, the speaker said:

"Because our ancient people expressed their emotions in this way..."

Phrases like "our ancient people" in "our ancient people expressed emotions this way" highlight a shared lineage and historical continuity. Emphasizing national identity based on bloodline is a manifestation of ethnic nationalism. Meanwhile, the speaker's use of "our" to describe ancient Chinese people illustrates Smith's (2002) "shared myths and historical memories," linking present-day Chinese individuals with their cultural tradition.

"Before the Winter Olympics, we might not have been familiar with many winter sports... The Winter Olympics will serve an educational purpose for us ordinary citizens." (Group 2, speaker 7)

"We" and "us ordinary citizens" signify the Chinese residents who watched the Olympics as viewers, and represent collective learning among Chinese viewers, reinforcing a

shared national memory. Although the speaker does not personally know other viewers, being fellow Chinese residents creates a sense of shared identity and collective experience.

Through these examples, the use of personal pronouns as metonyms illustrates how banal nationalism operates within ordinary language to sustain national identity, highlighting language's role in ideologically constructing and reaffirming the imagined community (Billig, 2005; Smith, 2002; Anderson, 1983).

However, national identity is constructed not only through internal commonalities among members but also through differentiation from other nations or ethnic groups, positioning identity in a dynamic relationship with the "other" (Triandafyllidou, 1998). This contrastive dimension gives national identity its meaning, as it relies on a semiotic process of marking boundaries between "us" and "them". In the focus groups, participants employed "we" not only to underscore shared identity but also to create a boundary when discussing elite athlete Eileen Gu:

"The media constantly reports on how outstanding Eileen Gu is. There's just so much coverage... makes us feel that she is actually quite distant from us, precisely because she is so exceptional in every way." (Group 4, speaker 2)

In this context, Gu is framed as an "other," an exceptional figure who, despite her achievements, is perceived as external to the collective identity of the speakers. Here, "we" symbolises the ordinary individuals who feel disconnected from Gu's level of success. This distinction highlights a semiotic distancing, where Gu represents a marked "them" in contrast to the unmarked "us," suggesting a gap between elite athletes and ordinary spectators.

However, when comparing this to the discussion of another elite athlete, Su Yiming, the narrative shifts:

"(Su Yiming), as a very young athlete, achieving such outstanding results at one of the world's top events is truly worth learning from and serves as a role model for our younger generation." (Group 4, speaker 2)

Despite Su Yiming's status as an elite athlete as well, his achievements resonate with ordinary citizens, providing a model of identification. Su's identity is framed within a shared national symbolism, reinforcing a connection with the broader Chinese public. This

difference likely stems from Su's background as a homegrown talent and a native Chinese who was born and grew up in China, which aligns with Chinese collective identity markers, such as shared heritage and a sense of national pride. Here, Su symbolises an idealised "we" - a member of the community whose achievements bring collective honour and embody aspirations that are attainable for ordinary citizens.

In contrast, as a naturalised athlete, Eileen Gu and her mixed heritage and American upbringing are recurrently emphasised in media representations. Gu's foreign background and distinct experiences in the United States serve as a symbol of alterity, differentiating her from the collective "we" of China. For interviewees residing in China, this cultural and experiential distance disrupts the possibility of full identification. Gu's presence is thereby positioned as an "other" within the discourse, serving as a foil that both embodies success and underscores its distance from the ordinary experiences of Chinese citizens.

This analysis reflects how the pronouns "we" and "they" are not merely linguistic choices but are semiotic tools that convey layers of national identity. Su's achievements are subsumed under the shared identity framework, creating a symbolic unity, whereas Gu's success is perceived through a lens of alterity, symbolically positioning her outside the boundary of collective identity. The differential perception of these athletes suggests a deeper process of national identity formation, where markers of familiarity and shared heritage reinforce collective belonging, while markers of difference establish symbolic boundaries.

9.3 Emotions: National pride and Xenophobia

Based on Scheff (1995) and Wetherell and Potter (1992 cited by Billig, 2005), it is an expression of national loyalty to 'our country' and xenophobia towards 'their country'. Such emotions, including national pride and loyalty or xenophobia relying on judgments, shared beliefs or representations of nations, 'we' and 'they', are expressed through complex discursive patterns and form part of wider historical processes.

In a time when the COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics, we hosted the Winter Olympics as scheduled, despite the ongoing pandemic, demonstrating the its strength and responsibility as a big country.

The speaker compares Beijing 2022 with Tokyo 2021 to emphasize that China achieved what Japan did not. Here, the speaker does not say "China hosted the Winter Olympics" but rather "we hosted." In this context, "we" signifies China. The speaker did not express it directly, but he/she implied his/her emotion of national pride through highlighting 'our nation had accomplished something that their nations had not'. The connotation is to praise the strength of "our country"(China) by downplaying the accomplishments of other nations (Japan).

Anti-Japanese nationalism is a prominent feature of Chinese public discourse. According to He (2013), the negative sentiment among Chinese people towards Japan, or even outright "hatred," is rooted in "ancient hatreds." These sentiments stem from nearly fifty years of painful conflict starting in the early 20th century, particularly the two major wars of 1894-1895 and 1937-1945, which sowed the seeds of long-standing animosity between the two nations. Popular narratives surrounding this period, often referred to as the "Century of Humiliation" (百年国耻), further intensify resentment toward Japan and the West (Gries, 2020). Nationalists argue that the Chinese nation bears deep scars from these wars, recalling that history with profound pain and bitterness, leading to a perception that Japan is a country that can never be loved or trusted.

Here is another example related to Japan, but the attitudes of the speaker seemed different.

"I believe that an outstanding athlete, regardless of their nationality, is good as long as they excel on the field. For example, Yuzuru Hanyu— even though he is Japanese, there are still quite a few of us who like him." (Group 4, Speaker 8)

This statement, while seemingly expressing an open-minded attitude toward appreciating athletes regardless of nationality, actually reinforces the notion of national identity as a significant factor in determining public sentiment. Through the use of phrases like " even though he is Japanese" followed by "quite a few of us (many Chinese) like him," the speaker unintentionally underscores the perceived anomaly of a Japanese athlete being admired in China.

From a semiotic perspective, the speaker's emphasis on 'nationality' serves as a signifier that carries both explicit and implicit signified meaning. Explicitly, the statement

suggests an admiration for athletic talent that transcends national boundaries. Implicitly, however, it reveals the latent ideological framework within which national identity remains a salient marker, even in contexts that ostensibly celebrate individual merit.

The use of "even though" and an omitted and hidden "but" as linguistic sign subtly signals the prevailing expectation that national affiliation—particularly with a country like Japan, given the historical and political tensions—should normally act as a barrier to admiration. Therefore, the speaker's comment is not just an expression of sportsmanship but also a reflection of how deeply ingrained national narratives and sentiments are in shaping public perception. The "anomaly" of Chinese fans admiring a Japanese athlete like Yuzuru Hanyu is presented as something noteworthy, rather than a simple fact, thus reinforcing the notion that national identity is a significant, if not dominant, factor in the collective consciousness.

One interviewee mentioned seeing a Samsung Olympic-themed pop-up store, set up as an official sponsor during the Beijing 2022. He noted that while he engaged in the free games and product experiences offered, he did not make any purchases at Samsung store. He explained:

"I can't remember exactly when it started, but the relationship between China and South Korea became very tense, and people began boycotting Korean goods. So I stopped buying Samsung phones since then." (Group 3, Speaker 5).

The event referenced by this interviewee likely pertains to the widespread boycott of Korean products in China in 2017, following China's dissatisfaction with South Korea's deployment of the THAAD missile defence system (Lim & Ferguson, 2022). The political and diplomatic tensions between the two nations fuelled a surge of nationalist sentiment and xenophobia towards South Korea, significantly influencing Chinese people's consumer behaviour (Stepchenkova and Dai, 2020). Years later, when the specific events that triggered such sentiments may have faded from memory, the boycott of certain products persists as a form of "consumption inertia," remaining embedded in the subconscious choices of consumers. Since then, "product made in South Korea" has become a new symbol of "goods that should be boycotted" and is subtly integrated into the daily communication and consumption lives of the Chinese people who have shared that common experience and memory.

Just as the first example mentioned the speaker's reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, many other interviewees also emphasised that Beijing 2022 was held during the pandemic. For example:

"I believe that our country being able to host the Olympics at this moment (during the pandemic) has, to some extent, enhanced a sense of national confidence and pride. This is particularly significant because the pandemic has been ongoing for a long time, and then a national-level sporting event appeared..." (Group 3, Speaker 2)

"I think this Winter Olympics has been a great platform, not only raising young people's awareness of winter sports, but also creating many glorious moments. Especially during this special period, it has boosted a sense of national pride among the people." (Group 2, Speaker 5)

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it also carries deeper social and cultural meanings. In these interview excerpts, the "Olympics" and the "pandemic" function as symbols imbued with significant nationalist connotations.

In this context, the Olympics are not just an international sporting event; they symbolise national strength, global image, and unity among the people. The successful hosting of the Olympics is perceived as a triumph on the global stage. Thus, the "Olympics" as a symbol represents not only a sporting competition but also the nation's capability and honour.

In these statements, the "pandemic" symbolises hardship and challenges. It is more than just a background fact; it serves as a symbol highlighting the country's ability to succeed under adverse conditions. The presence of the pandemic makes the successful hosting of the Olympics even more symbolically significant, implying that the nation has not only overcome the virus but has also triumphed over challenges that other countries may not have faced.

From a nationalist perspective, these statements convey a sense of superiority. The successful hosting of the Olympics during the pandemic is endowed with a meaning that transcends the event itself, symbolising the nation's victory in the face of extreme challenges. By linking the Olympics with the pandemic, the discourse suggests China's ability to handle a global crisis, thereby reinforcing the citizens' sense of national identity and pride.

Additionally, some interviewees mentioned that when watching the Olympics, they only focus on the athletes from their own country (Chinese athletes). They also noted that the Winter Olympics do not receive as much attention as the Summer Olympics in China, because the Chinese team and athletes didn't perform as well in winter sports (in terms of medals) as they did in the Summer Olympics.

"I don't necessarily watch the live broadcasts of the Olympic events, but I might see on Weibo (a social media platform) that our country has achieved some breakthroughs or won medals in certain events. Then, I would go and watch the relevant game videos." (Group 3, Speaker 5)

The first speaker's selective engagement with Olympic broadcasts, choosing only to watch events where Chinese athletes have won medals, symbolises a conditional form of national pride. This selective attention is not simply a matter of preference but acts as a semiotic mechanism through which national identity is reinforced at moments of victory. Viewing becomes a symbolically charged act, where the act of watching Chinese athletes' success represents an active choice to witness and celebrate instances that affirm national prestige. This behaviour aligns with findings by Matti and Zhou (2021) on how Olympic success can enhance subjective well-being and reinforce a collective national pride. In this context, watching Olympic events transforms from enjoying sporting to a ritual of national pride, where the engagement itself is driven by the pursuit of a shared sense of accomplishment.

"It seems that the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics didn't receive as much attention as the 2008 Olympics, but I think this is a common phenomenon in China. The Winter Olympics generally don't attract as much attention as the Summer Olympics here. In terms of medal results, it's definitely not as good as the Summer Olympics. China's development in winter sports seems to be slower. If you look at the results from the previous Winter Olympics, China was quite low in the medal table. This year, there has been a qualitative leap in performance, which I think is partly because it was held in Beijing. It's only in recent years that domestic winter sports have started to gain momentum." (Group 1, Speaker 7)

The second speaker highlighted the disparity in attention given to the Winter and Summer Olympics in China. This contrast acts as a broader symbol of national pride, where attention is selectively afforded to events in which China's success is most prominent. The

speaker notes that while the Winter Olympics have historically garnered less attention due to limited performance in winter sports, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics marked a "qualitative leap" in achievement, thereby elevating winter sports within the national consciousness. This shift, driven by improved performance on home soil, serves as a symbol of national progress and highlights how Olympic hosting not only affects national pride but also elevates sports' cultural status domestically. Hosting is thus framed as an act of state capability, where the visibility of national achievement on an international stage bolsters collective pride.

Hosting the Olympics in Beijing is highlighted as a factor in the improvement of China's performance in winter sports. This suggests that the act of hosting is not just about the event itself but is a symbol of national capability and influence. The speaker implies that the attention and resources directed towards winter sports due to the Olympics have contributed to a "qualitative leap" in performance, which in turn feeds back into a sense of national pride. The fact that this progress occurred during a Beijing-hosted event further reinforces the idea that national pride is tied to the country's ability to successfully host and perform in international events.

Guo and Xu's (2023) research explains the reason for this tendency toward selective viewership, which suggests that China's engagement in modern sports has been largely motivated by nationalism (Xu, 2006). Since international sports achievements serve as effective means of securing international recognition, China has fostered a state-run sports system since the 1960s, directing significant resources toward elevating national athletes (Dong, 2003 cited by Dong, 2014). Unlike Western media's commercial framing, Chinese media adopts a state-driven, propaganda-focused model (Shao & Wang, 2017), reinforcing a narrative where success in sports is seen as national triumph. This ideological framing, where media highlights China's victories over losses, cultivates a viewership conditioned to associate watching with winning and reinforces national pride as a primary motivator for tuning into Olympic events.

In summary, selective viewing among Chinese audiences is not merely an entertainment habit but a symbolic behaviour influenced by both state-driven narratives and a historical orientation toward nationalism. By watching moments of Chinese success, audiences partake in a form of symbolic reinforcement of national identity, where victory acts as a conduit for collective pride. This phenomenon underscores the semiotic process by

which sports viewership becomes a marker of national pride, symbolically separating high-profile achievements from events with less national significance.

9.4 National Symbols: Official Symbols and Cultural

The focus group data indicates that interviewees can perceive and distinguish between official and unofficial national symbols. Official symbols, such as the country's name, national flag, emblem, and anthem, function as modern totems—signs that bear a unique relationship to the nations they represent, differentiating them from others and reaffirming their identity boundaries (Cerulo, 1993). These symbols embody and reinforce national identity by fostering unity, legitimising formal authority, and inspiring patriotic action.

In contrast, cultural symbols, rooted in traditional cultural elements such as art, literature, cuisine, handicrafts and colours, operate at a more informal level, representing national heritage and shared cultural identity (Castelló and Mihelj, 2018). These unofficial symbols evoke national pride through familiar and often nostalgic cultural references, extending beyond official representations to include personal experiences and expressions of identity (Billig, 1995; Smith, 2009).

The ability of Chinese citizens, as exemplified by the interviewees, to recall and recognise these elements—both as official national symbols and as components of traditional culture—can be attributed to the country's educational system. Within the structure of China's nine-year compulsory education, spanning primary to lower secondary school, and its higher education system, all students are instructed in traditional cultural education and "red education" (socialist education) (Wu, 2016; Xu, 2018). This pedagogical framework fosters common historical memories and shared culture (Smith, 1991), thereby shaping students' sense of national identity.

9.4.1 The Role of Official National Symbols in Beijing 2022 and Olympic Sponsorship

National symbols play a pivotal role in shaping collective identity, fostering a sense of unity, and reinforcing national pride. In the context of branding and sponsorship, such symbols can significantly influence consumer behaviour, particularly when strategically

incorporated into commercial products. This chapter examines how Anta, an official sponsor of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, utilised the Five-star Red Flag (the Chinese national flag) and its elements in product design and marketing to evoke nationalism, strengthen brand loyalty, and enhance consumer engagement. Drawing on theories of national identity, semiotics, and consumer behaviour, this study investigates how symbols embedded in Olympic merchandise shaped public perceptions and purchasing decisions.

9.4.1.1 The full national flag

The national flag is widely regarded as one of the most powerful representations of a nation's identity (Cerulo, 1993). It encapsulates historical narratives, conveys ideological meanings, and fosters emotional attachments among citizens. While Saussure (1971 [1916]) viewed flags as part of a symbolic system, contemporary scholars argue that they carry layered socio-cultural meanings, which vary depending on historical and political contexts (Leone, 2018). Through Anta's Olympic sponsorship, the flag and its colours—particularly "China Red"—became an integral part of consumer engagement, evoking deep-seated nationalist sentiments.

From a political perspective, national flags extend beyond their conventional role as symbols of unity and solidarity, serving as instruments of power, hierarchy, and ideological control. Xu (2021) argues that flags not only represent national cohesion but also reinforce structures of dominance and subordination. This view aligns with Shanafelt's (2008) assertion that national symbols function as mechanisms of political allegiance and control. Beyond their political significance, national flags influence consumer perception and marketing. Wang and Zuo (2017) find that the presence of the American flag on a product can elicit negative consumer evaluations in the U.S., illustrating how national symbols evoke complex and sometimes contradictory responses depending on context and audience. However, in contrast to the ambivalence observed in U.S. markets, the Chinese national flag appears to maintain a more consistently positive influence on Chinese consumer sentiment.

Anta, as the official sponsor of Team China, strategically incorporated national symbols into its sportswear. The 'national clothing' collection, which featured the Chinese national flag, gained immense popularity during the Olympics. The flag's historical significance and its role in nationalist sentiment influenced consumer purchasing decisions.

“At that time (during the 2022 Winter Olympics), Anta released a ‘national clothing’ collection, which was really popular. Everyone wanted to buy it, and the online stores sold out...” (Group 3, Speaker 5).

The “national clothing” referred to here was a range of sportswear of the same style as the Chinese national team, released by Anta, a sponsor of the Beijing 2022 Olympics, featuring embroidered Chinese national flags on the chest. The term “national clothing” implies that the products, adorned with the national flag as an official symbol of China, were seen as representing national identity during that period. When the national flag is featured on a product as an official national symbol, it evokes consumers' nationalist sentiments, influencing their purchasing decisions and encouraging them to support or buy products related to their nations (Castellò and Miheli, 2018).

In the focus groups, the national flag mentioned by interviewees is the Five-star Red Flag, the national flag of the People's Republic of China. On November 15, 1949, the People's Daily published an official explanation of the flag's meaning, which has since become the accepted account. It stated that the red flag symbolises revolution, and the five-pointed stars, along with their arrangement, symbolise the unity of the people under the leadership of the Communist Party. The stars are yellow, signifying brightness on the red earth, and their configuration—each of the four small stars pointing towards the large star—symbolises unity under one centre. The flag's design is described as both compact and beautiful (The People's Daily, 1949). The flag's structure encapsulates China's revolutionary history and reflects the nation's aspirations for unity, harmony, and stability. Based on Tian (2015), the People's Daily interpretation is seen as reflecting the underlying values the newly established government wanted to convey to its people.

Xu (2021) notes that when the national flag of the People's Republic of China was designed, symbols like the hammer and sickle were deliberately avoided to distinguish it from the Soviet Union's flag, and the colour white was discarded as it was associated with the Kuomintang government, which was hostile to the Communist Party at the time. The white areas controlled by the Kuomintang during the Second Civil War (1927–1937) were referred to as the “white area.”

From the perspective of social semiotics, symbols derive their meaning within specific social contexts and through particular material forms. The national flag, as a symbolic representation of the nation, aligns with Asif and Ali's (2019) view that symbols

embedded in visuals, words, and objects transmit collective ideals, conveying cultural values and national aspirations at that era.

When the official Olympic sponsors do not use the national flag logo in product design and promotion, even if they are also Chinese local brands, they may be able to evoke less nationalism and patriotism in consumers. An example of a local Olympic sponsor, Tsingtao Beer, that does not use the national flag logo is as follows:

“This year at the World Cup, I bought a special edition of Coca-Cola from France, which had packaging featuring the French flag and team uniform elements. I bought it because I support the French team. However, the beer produced by the sponsor of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics didn't display the national flag but only featured the Olympic name and logo, which I found less meaningful. I wouldn't say I particularly like or dislike the Winter Olympics, but I feel more affinity for the Chinese team. Printing the Chinese flag or team symbols would mean more to me. To me, using images of specific sports actions and techniques on the cans doesn't carry much significance.” (Group 2, Speaker 2)

In terms of the views on FIFA World Cup, because the speaker is a fan of the French football team, he/she was willing to purchase sponsored products printed with the French flag to demonstrate his/her fan identification and team loyalty to the French team. In terms of the views on Olympic sponsorship products, the speaker is more concerned about whether there are symbols related to China than symbols related to the Olympics. But his views reflect that in the Olympic Games, his identification with the Chinese national team is not just fan or team identification and team loyalty, but actually a kind of national identity and national loyalty to China. The presence of the national flag on a commercial item, for instance, enhances the symbolic value of the product, evoking a sense of belonging, solidarity and loyalty to the nation (Anderson, 1983). The absence of a Chinese flag on certain Winter Olympic products diminished the emotional resonance for the speaker, so he/she thought these products were ‘less meaningful’.

One of the reasons for the speaker's different identification with the French team in the World Cup and the Chinese team in the Olympics may be that the Chinese team did not enter the finals of the Men's Football World Cup. Here, the researcher cannot compare whether the speaker's fan identification or national identification would have a higher priority if the Chinese team and the French team were playing in the World Cup at the same time.

9.4.1.2 *The elements of the national flag*

“The outfits at the opening ceremony were quite attractive..... the Chinese delegation wore attire in the colours of the national flag...” (Group 3, Speaker 5).

"I remember the Chinese team's outfits at the opening ceremony—they had the 'stir-fried tomato and egg' colours, and it looks very Chinese..." (Group 3, Speaker 3).

These two speakers from different focus groups both mentioned the Chinese team's entrance outfits designed by Anta for the 2022 Winter Olympics opening ceremony, which featured a red-and-yellow colour scheme. The athletes wore red trench coat-style uniforms adorned with yellow (or gold) national emblems on the left chest, complemented by red plush hats and red knitted scarves embroidered with the Chinese characters “中国” (“Zhong Guo,” meaning China) in yellow. The design of these outfits was inspired by the red and yellow hues of the Chinese national flag.

The elements of a flag can include colours, symbols, and shapes. This example illustrates how the national flag can still be recognised or symbolised even when not presented in its entirety but instead through its deconstructed elements, such as colours and patterns. Roland Barthes, in his 1964 work *Rhetoric of the Image*, used an example of advertisement involving an Italian pasta brand marketed to French consumers. The advertisement featured tomatoes, peppers, and mushrooms, with the hues of red, yellow, and green evoking the Italian flag (signifying “Italianicity”). The brand's name further reinforced the connotations of authentic Italian identity.

Similarly, the Chinese team's outfits employed visual rhetoric to convey a sense of “Chineseness.” As Barthes (1964) noted, viewers do not need to fully comprehend textual elements for such associations to work. The first speaker directly identified the red-and-yellow combination as the colours of the Chinese flag, where the imagery of these hues conveyed the flag's symbolism. This provides an example of anchorage, where text (in this case, the Chinese characters) supports the visual message. However, the speaker did not mention the yellow Chinese characters embroidered on the scarf, possibly because their small size made them difficult to notice. At first glance, they may have appeared as decorative yellow patterns rather than text.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), symbols act through the relationship between a carrier (e.g., a knight) and a symbolic attribute (e.g., the colour of his arms), where

the attribute defines the identity of the carrier (pp. 105-6). The national flag thus serves as an iconographic symbol, signifying national identity and state authority. Its symbolic value is twofold: it attracts attention through its artistic depiction, with the colours and design intentionally conspicuous, and it carries cultural significance, with viewers recognising it as a powerful signifier of sovereignty and national pride (Hermeren, 1969; van Leeuwen, 2011). Consequently, the national flag functions as both a state-endorsed symbol of nationalism and a reflection of collective identity, uniting diverse groups under a common national identity.

By contrast, the second speaker perceived the outfit as “very Chinese” but associated the red-and-yellow colour scheme with “stir-fried tomato and egg,” a popular Chinese dish known for its red tomatoes and yellow eggs, rather than the national flag. This dish can serve as a typical example of how cuisine or traditional food can function as an unofficial cultural symbol of China to evoke Chinese identity. This cultural reference recalls an earlier moment during the 2016 Rio Olympics, when a prominent Chinese television presenter, Bai Yansong, remarked: “The Chinese delegation’s ‘stir-fried tomato and egg’ entrance outfit isn’t too bad, is it? After all, stir-fried tomato and egg is the first dish many Chinese people learn to cook.” (chinadaily.com, 2016). The dish, as a familiar and iconic element of Chinese cuisine, also evokes a sense of national pride and identity, functioning similarly to the national flag in reinforcing a collective consciousness of “Chineseness.”

9.4.1.3 Red Colour

The colour red, frequently mentioned by respondents, functions metonymically within the context of national identity. In Chinese culture, red is emblematic of celebration, prosperity, and national pride, thereby establishing an implicit association between the colour and the nation itself. When employed in high-visibility contexts, such as the Anta podium suits, red serves as a symbolic vessel for Chinese identity on the international stage, effectively standing in for the nation (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This phenomenon aligns with broader global patterns, as Weitman (1973) notes that nearly 80 per cent of all national flags incorporate red in their design. However, while red is a common feature in national symbolism worldwide, in China, the red of the national flag—commonly referred to as “China Red” (中国红)—carries an additional layer of meaning that is uniquely ingrained in Chinese historical and political consciousness.

One respondent remarked:

“The sponsor I remember most is Anta, partly because its logo was so conspicuous, appearing in bold red on the athletes' podium suits, which made it very eye-catching.”
(Group 1, Speaker 2).

However, it is noteworthy that the podium suits designed by Anta are not exclusively red but incorporate both red and yellow. The respondent's reference to the suits as "red" while omitting mention of yellow suggests a selective perceptual emphasis. This tendency may be attributed to the greater visual dominance of red in comparison to yellow, but it may also reflect a deeper cultural predisposition. Research indicates that contemporary Chinese individuals exhibit a pronounced preference for the colour red, a preference shaped by traditional cultural values, historical experiences, political narratives, and nationalist sentiment.

Among the 194 national flags worldwide, the six most frequently used colours are red, green, blue, yellow, white, and black (Sun & Zhou, 2016). In the case of China's Five-star Red Flag, red and yellow were deliberately chosen under the dual influence of traditional Chinese culture and the revolutionary ideals of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Xinhua Dictionary (2011, p. 190) identifies six core meanings of the Chinese character "红" (hóng, red): (a) a colour resembling blood; (b) a symbol of success and trustworthiness; (c) an emblem of festivity; (d) a signifier of revolution; (e) an indicator of business prosperity; and (f) a surname. In traditional Chinese culture, red is strongly associated with auspiciousness, joy, prosperity, and celebration, which is evident in practices such as the use of red decorations at weddings and festivals, as well as the tradition of gifting red envelopes containing money during holidays.

Beyond its cultural connotations, red also holds profound political significance, particularly in socialist and communist contexts. Chairman Mao Zedong (1967, p. 28) famously described revolution as “an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” Consequently, under CPC rule, military forces were designated the "Red Army," liberated territories were referred to as "red areas," and internationally, the People's Republic of China was frequently labelled "Red China." The national flag, alongside the national anthem, serves as a crucial instrument in nation-building, fostering collective identity and legitimising state authority. As Cerulo (1993) argues, such symbols function to “create bonds, motivate patriotic action, honour the efforts of citizens, and legitimise formal authority.” Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2018) describe the flag of China as a representation of revolutionary sacrifice,

with red symbolising the blood of those who perished in the struggle for the foundation of the communist state. This symbolism is reinforced in cultural artefacts, such as the well-known Chinese patriotic song Heroic Hymn (1964), which includes the lyrics:

“Why is the battle flag as beautiful as a painting? The blood of heroes dyed it red.”

Thus, the red of the national flag is not merely a decorative choice; it serves as a powerful mnemonic device, commemorating the sacrifices of revolutionary martyrs and instilling in future generations a recognition of the nation's hard-won peace and stability.

In sum, red, a dominant feature of Chinese national symbolism, carries deep associations with cultural heritage, political ideology, and national identity. While its presence in the Chinese national flag aligns with global flag design trends, its historical and revolutionary connotations render its meaning distinctly Chinese. The prominent use of red in national branding, exemplified by Anta's podium suits, further strengthens China's global identity. However, the prioritization of red over other national colours, such as yellow, raises critical questions regarding perception, cultural conditioning, and the mechanisms shaping national identity. This suggests that visual symbols are not merely aesthetic elements but are strategically employed to construct and reinforce collective identity, both domestically and internationally.

9.4.2 The Role of Cultural National Symbols in Beijing 2022 and Olympic Sponsorship

In the focus group, many participants mentioned that they noticed several elements of traditional Chinese culture were symbolically integrated into the visual and aesthetic representations of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, particularly in sponsorship products, advertisements, and the opening and closing ceremonies. These elements included the mascot Shuey Rhon Rhon, designed based on the motif of the red lantern, the 24 solar terms and willow branches at opening and closing ceremony, Mulan and Dragon elements in Eileen Gu's Olympic sponsorship, and the use of ink wash painting and blue-and-white porcelain patterns in the official uniforms of the organising committee. These symbols not only represented China's rich cultural heritage but also functioned as metonymic representations of national identity, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging among the audience (Li, 2022).

In the focus group interviews, several participants reflected on the presence of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, particularly in the opening and closing ceremonies and sponsor-related promotional materials. Liang (2019) conceptualises the Olympics as a transnational social drama, where national identity and cultural heritage are staged through symbolic performances. Within this framework, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics became a site of cultural resonance, in which the reappropriation of historical traditions reinforced cultural national symbols and bolstered China's image on the global stage. Since most audiences experience the Olympics via media rather than in person, the event functions as a mediated spectacle, disseminated through traditional broadcasts (television, radio) and digital platforms (streaming services, short videos, social media). This aligns with the theory of media events as ritualised performances, in which states deploy symbolic narratives to strengthen national identity and advance cultural diplomacy (Liang, 2019)

9.4.2.1 Cultural National Symbols at Beijing2022 opening and closing ceremonies

(1) Mascot Shuey Rhon Rhon

Shuey Rhon Rhon (雪容融) was the official mascot of the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympics. However, its significance extended beyond the Paralympic Games, as it was prominently featured in the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, leaving a lasting impression on both audiences and participants. Beyond its presence in official ceremonies and sporting events, Shuey Rhon Rhon became widely recognisable through extensive promotional campaigns, reinforcing its cultural and ideological significance.

The mascot Shuey Rhon Rhon, designed as a Chinese lantern child set to welcome friends from around the world for the Games, serves as an iconic example of how traditional Chinese symbols were integrated into modern contexts. Shuey Rhon Rhon's Chinese name, "雪容融 (Xue Rong Rong)", literally meaning Snow, inclusiveness, and harmony, can be translated to "melting snow," evoking a sense of warmth, which is further reinforced by the lantern design (Cai & Son, 2022). Its visual features draw from the traditional Chinese red lantern, a symbol of festivity, warmth, and good fortune, frequently associated with the Chinese Lunar New Year. The use of red, a dominant colour in Chinese national symbolism,

reinforces the celebratory atmosphere while simultaneously aligning with broader themes of national pride and cultural heritage.

Focus group participants recognised the deep cultural resonance of Shuey Rhon Rhon, particularly its association with the Chinese New Year. One interviewee stated:

“Shuey Rhon Rhon is indeed quite cute, and I have a large-size toy of it now, which I find really nice. It really feels festive during the New Year, and the red colour makes me feel like it is indeed the New Year...” (Group 1, Speaker 6).

Another interviewee agreed, adding:

“Yes, I can bring it (Shuey Rhon Rhon) out again next year for the New Year.” (Group 1, Speaker 5).

This statement reflects a broader cultural recognition of the symbolic importance of red lanterns during the Chinese New Year, with the red hue itself evoking a sense of celebration and renewal.

“Yes, Bing Dwen Dwen (the mascot of the 2022 Winter Olympics) may only be used this one time, but Shuey Rhon Rhon, this red lantern, can be used every year.” (Group 1, Speaker 6)

This conversation about Shuey Rhon Rhon sparked a prolonged discussion, and the view that “Shuey Rhon Rhon is very suitable for the New Year” was almost unanimously agreed upon by the group members.

From a semiotic perspective, Shuey Rhon Rhon operates as a signifier, with its signified meanings deeply rooted in Chinese cultural heritage. According to Barthes’ (1957) theory of myth, cultural symbols are not merely visual representations but ideological constructs that naturalize certain narratives. Based on Lu (2024), traditional lanterns in modern contexts serve not only as decorative objects but as cultural markers that reinforce heritage in contemporary society. In this case, the red lantern—while traditionally associated with festivity and warmth—is recontextualized within the Olympic spectacle to communicate national identity, unity, and soft power diplomacy.

At the denotative level, the mascot visually resembles a traditional Chinese lantern, decorated with paper-cut motifs and a ruyi symbol, reinforcing its association with prosperity and celebration. According to the official statement from the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee (Xinhua News, 2019), the design aims to evoke the festive spirit of the Chinese New Year, coinciding with the Chinese New Year and Spring Festival celebrations that take place in February during the Games, while also embodying values such as warmth, friendship, courage, and perseverance, which resonate with the spirit of the Paralympic Games. However, at the connotative level, it signifies more than just a festival decoration. The red hue, historical connections to state rituals, and its symbolic presence at the Games collectively embed it within a broader nationalist discourse, transforming it into a marker of China's cultural continuity and resilience.

The red lantern is a highly significant cultural symbol in contemporary China, extending beyond its decorative function to embody historical and political meanings. While in Chinese communities worldwide, including Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas diasporas, red lanterns primarily serve as festive decorations, particularly for Chinese New Year, in mainland China, their symbolism carries deeper national and political connotations. The association of red lanterns with state authority dates back to the 1949 founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China, when large red lanterns were first prominently displayed on Tiananmen Gate, marking the establishment of a new political order (Guangming Daily, 2021). Since then, these lanterns have been institutionalised as a symbol of national pride, state legitimacy, and collective celebration, appearing in major political and national events.

Beyond their aesthetic appeal, red lanterns are embedded in China's ideological landscape. Their use in state-sponsored events, including the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, reflects the state's strategic employment of traditional cultural symbols to project national unity and reinforce China's civilisational narrative. The political significance of red lanterns is further underscored by their deliberate integration into public art, architecture, and media representations. As scholars argue, red lanterns function as semiotic markers of national identity, representing both festive joy and the political authority of the Chinese state (Artda, 2024).

The selective emphasis on red, rather than other national colours such as yellow, further highlights the constructed nature of national symbolism. This prioritisation aligns with broader visual strategies of cultural nationalism, where certain symbols are amplified to

convey ideological messages. In the case of Shuey Rhon Rhon, the Paralympic mascot modelled after a red lantern, the symbol was repackaged for a global audience, intertwining elements of Chinese folklore, political heritage, and commercial branding to create an emblem that simultaneously resonates with domestic nationalism and international cultural diplomacy.

(2) The Twenty-Four Solar Terms at Beijing 2022 Opening ceremony

The opening ceremony of Beijing 2022 commenced with a visually striking short film depicting diverse landscapes across China, representing the seasonal transformations embedded within the Twenty-Four Solar Terms (Olympics.com, 2022). The Twenty-Four Solar Terms (二十四节气) is an ancient Chinese calendar system derived from astronomical observations and seasonal changes, historically guiding agricultural activities and daily life (Guan & Lou, 2023). Beyond their practical function, they encapsulate a fundamental precept in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics—the unity of humanity and nature—which reinforces their role as a cultural symbol (Zheng, 2023). Notably, the first solar term, the Beginning of Spring (Lichun, 立春), coincided with the official opening day of the Games on 4 February 2022.

Several focus group participants commented on the impact of this segment. One participant described their experience as follows:

"I think this was my first time watching the Winter Olympics... I wasn't really paying attention beforehand... But when the opening ceremony started, I noticed that many people around me were watching it. Then, when the Twenty-Four Solar Terms video was shown, I felt deeply moved. There was so much Chinese culture in it... I think it really went viral ('出圈'), and that made me want to follow more of the events later." (Group 4, Speaker 6)

This speaker's emotional response of feeling "deeply moved" by the opening segment featuring the Twenty-Four Solar Terms highlights their cultural resonance with these symbols. According to Ettema (2005), media narratives are most effective when they align with audiences' pre-existing cultural frameworks, fostering a deeper sense of connection and engagement. The speaker's immediate recognition of the imagery likely stems from collective cultural memory, as the Solar Terms are deeply embedded as a foundational aspect of Chinese traditions, reinforced through formal education in schools from an early age. The poetic and visually striking representations in the promotional video further amplified its

impact, evoking nostalgia and national pride (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, the ritualized performance of the Twenty-Four Solar Terms in the opening ceremony provided a sense of historical continuity, seamlessly bridging ancient Chinese wisdom with contemporary national identity.

From a semiotic perspective, the denotation of the Twenty-Four Solar Terms in this context is their ceremonial representation—the visual depiction of seasonal landscapes that correspond to each term. However, their connotation extends beyond meteorology, encompassing philosophical and literary traditions, reflecting China's cyclical worldview of time and the harmony between human life and nature (Wang et al., 2023). The ritualisation of the Solar Terms in the Olympic opening ceremony further enhanced their semiotic function, transforming an agricultural calendar into a national symbol.

As Barthes (1957) argues, cultural myths operate by reinterpreting everyday symbols as ideological tools, reinforcing collective national consciousness. This transformation underscores how the Solar Terms serve not only as historical markers of time but as contemporary signifiers of China's enduring cultural identity. At a mythic level, the Twenty-Four Solar Terms integrate Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist cosmologies, embedding moral and spiritual meaning into natural cycles in the agricultural civilization of ancient China. Their revival in contemporary cultural events, particularly in global spectacles like the Olympics, underscores their status as a national cultural symbol (Wang et al., 2023).

Cultural nationalism operates by transforming historical knowledge into an idealised representation of national heritage, reinforcing collective memory and identity (Li, 2022). The Twenty-Four Solar Terms, a deeply embedded cultural reference in Chinese traditions, function as a unifying symbol that bridges generational and regional divides, fostering a shared national consciousness among Chinese people worldwide (Guan & Lou, 2023). The integration of the Solar Terms into international cultural exchanges, language education, and literary traditions has further elevated their status as a national symbol, particularly following their inclusion in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016 (Zheng, 2023). Within the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, these elements were mobilised as part of a broader strategy to assert China's civilisational continuity and global cultural influence, reinforcing its status as a cultural power on the world stage.

The Beijing 2022 Olympic ceremonies recontextualised traditional Chinese cultural elements, not only as historical artefacts but as active symbols of contemporary national

identity. Another participant also referenced the Solar Terms in relation to the concept of Chinese romanticism:

"As [Speaker 6] just mentioned, the Twenty-Four Solar Terms in the opening ceremony... I think we put a lot of thought into both the opening and closing ceremonies. There was a kind of Chinese-style romanticism in them. For another example, at the closing ceremony, the act of breaking willow branches ('折柳送别') really stood out to me. In ancient times, people used willows to express emotions—breaking a branch to bid farewell and hoping the person would stay. I think this was a very touching way to express our emotions towards the guests who came to the Olympics." (Group 4, Speaker 5)

The reference to “Chinese-style romanticism” is significant. The speaker explicitly distinguishes Chinese romantic expression from Western romantic expression, framing it as a uniquely Chinese aesthetic sensibility. Based on Lams (2018), Chinese official discourse maintains national unity by excluding dissenting voices and constructing a self-other dichotomy. The connotation of “Chinese-style romanticism” may thus be understood in contrast to Western modes of direct emotional expression, with Chinese culture favouring a more nuanced and implicit mode of articulation. Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) highlight the aesthetic dimension of national image, which encompasses perceptions of a country’s aesthetic qualities, including evaluations of the attractiveness of its culture and traditions, as well as the beauty of its landscapes and scenery. Wang et al. (2024) argue that the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics sought to reconstruct a narrative of aesthetic Chinese nationhood by drawing upon the philosophical tradition of *yijing* (意境, ‘idea-image’), which emphasises suggestiveness and naturalness in the representation of China’s landscapes and historical heritage. In contrast to the masculine and authoritative imagery that characterised the 2008 Summer Olympics, the 2022 Winter Olympics projected a more poetic, introspective, and delicate aesthetic. This contributes to the mythologisation of a distinctively Chinese mode of cultural expression, reinforcing narratives of cultural confidence and national identity.

(3) The Willow Branches at Beijing 2022 Closing ceremony

Another example of Chinese romanticism and cultural symbolism in the Beijing 2022 mentioned by this interviewee was the re-interpretation of *Zhe Liu Ji Qing* (折柳寄情, "Breaking Willow Branches to Convey Feelings") in the closing ceremony. This ancient

Chinese tradition, where willow branches were gifted to departing individuals as a symbol of remembrance and longing for reunion, was modernised through a multimedia performance (Olympics.com, 2022). The ceremony featured 80 performers creating LED-lit willow trails, followed by 365 individuals holding willow branches, symbolising the bittersweet nature of parting and the transition from winter to spring (People's Daily, 2022).

The emotional resonance of this scene was highlighted by a participant in Focus Group 1, who described the moment as a culturally significant farewell gift to international guests attending the Olympics:

"The last scene of the closing ceremony was 'Zhe Liu Ji Qing (折柳寄情)', which was a gift to our international friends... This expresses a blessing from our Chinese culture to our international guests." (Group 1, Speaker 4)

The willow tree has long been one of the most frequently employed and richly connotative plant symbols in Chinese poetry, embodying aesthetic sensibilities and distinctly national literary traditions (Tan et al., 2022). Historically, the willow has been closely associated with themes of farewell and nostalgia, with early references found in The Book of Songs (Shījīng, 诗经), a collection of ancient Chinese poetry compiled between the 11th and 6th centuries BCE. One of the most notable examples is the poem Cǎiwēi (《采薇》, Plucking the Bracken), where the imagery of willows represents departure and longing:

"Long ago when we started, the willows spread their shade. Now that we turn back, the snowflakes fly."

Xi Wo Wang Yi 昔我往矣, Yang Liu Yi Yi 杨柳依依。Jin Wo Lai Si 今我来思, Yu Xue Fei Fei 雨雪霏霏 (Mao 1982, 9.414 cited by Wang and Yang).

This imagery reflects the emotional turmoil of soldiers departing for war, expressing both a duty to protect one's homeland and a deep yearning for family and home. As the willow branches swayed in the spring breeze, they symbolized the passage of time, separation, and the uncertainty of return. Over time, this symbolism of farewell became deeply ingrained in Chinese poetry, particularly during the Tang Dynasty, when poets frequently invoked the willow as a metaphor for parting and longing.

Beyond its visual and symbolic significance, the willow tree also functions as a linguistic and phonetic signifier. As Tan et al. (2022) note, 柳 (liǔ, willow) shares phonetic

similarity with 留 (liú, stay), reinforcing its cultural association with longing and reluctance to part. Over time, this symbolism that people give way to willow donating farewell to parting relatives or friends, seeing someone off with an osier to express retain, and looking forward the return of relatives or friends, became deeply ingrained in Chinese poetry, particularly in the Tang dynasty, where parting often carried profound emotional connotations.

Through centuries of literary tradition, breaking willow branches has come to signify both departure and enduring connection. In semiotic terms, the willow branch operates as a signifier, while its signified meaning is rooted in farewell rituals, longing, and remembrance (Zang, 2022). By incorporating this motif into the Olympic closing ceremony, the organisers transformed an ancient poetic tradition into a contemporary expression of international friendship. The use of willow branches at the ceremony aligns with Barthes' (1957) theory of cultural myth-making, in which traditional symbols are reinterpreted to construct ideological narratives. The ritual of breaking willow branches, historically a personal and sentimental act, was elevated into a national performance, symbolising China's engagement with the international community through uniquely Chinese expressions of sentimentality and hospitality.

Interestingly, as Launer (2005) notes, weeping willows were unknown in Europe until they were imported from China in the early 18th century. This cultural transfer is memorialised in the "Willow Pattern" plate design of 1779, which became a symbol of Chinese exoticism in Western decorative arts. This historical connection may have influenced the choice of the willow in the Beijing 2022 Olympics, reinforcing it as an emblem of China's distinct cultural heritage in the global view.

However, the Olympics, as a global media spectacle, inherently encapsulates the paradox of globalism and nationalism (Billings et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2012). While the Games ostensibly promote universal values of unity, peace, and sportsmanship, they simultaneously function as a stage for nationalist display and geopolitical signalling. As Lee (2021) asserts, the Winter Olympics transcend the realm of athletic competition, constituting instead "an occasion of national pride and international prestige." Within the geopolitical landscape of Beijing 2022, where China navigated diplomatic boycotts, human rights scrutiny, and pandemic-induced isolation, the Olympic ceremonies became a strategic

performance of soft power, carefully crafted to project an image of harmony, cultural sophistication, and international goodwill.

From the perspective of cultural nationalism, a nation is perceived as an organic entity that evolves over time, with its essence rooted in its distinct and ‘superior’ civilization (Guo, 2009). As Ettema (2005) contends, cultural performances in media events do not merely reflect reality; rather, they are meticulously curated narratives, engineered to elicit emotional engagement, shape collective memory, and reinforce national pride. The invocation of traditional Chinese symbols at Beijing 2022 was not merely a nostalgic homage to cultural heritage, but an active assertion of China’s civilizational continuity and aesthetic distinctiveness within global sports diplomacy. By deviating from the standardized iconography of the Olympic Games and foregrounding uniquely Chinese cultural imagery, the event reaffirmed China’s self-conception as a civilizational state, positioning itself not only as a participant in global modernity but also as an alternative centre of cultural authority and influence (Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, as Wang et al. (2024) highlight, Beijing 2022 placed significant emphasis on themes of unity, peace, and mutual prosperity, aligning with its official slogan, “Together for a Shared Future” (一起向未来). Yet, a critical question arises: Whose unity, and under what conditions? While the Games outwardly championed inclusivity and global cooperation, they simultaneously functioned as a mechanism of cultural projection, reinforcing a carefully curated, state-endorsed vision of Chinese identity on the world stage. This strategic cultural framing not only sought to legitimize China’s national narrative domestically but also to assert its cultural distinctiveness and diplomatic positioning within the international order.

9.4.2.2 Cultural Symbols of Olympic Sponsorship

The Olympic Games serve as a global platform for the performance and reinforcement of national identity through various symbolic mechanisms, extending beyond official ceremonies into commercial and media narratives (Liang, 2019). By embedding traditional cultural symbols within corporate sponsorship and branding strategies, nationalist discourse becomes interwoven with consumer culture, aligning with the broader ideological objectives of cultural nationalism. This commercial appropriation of national symbols not

only sustains a sense of collective identity but also reinforces historical continuity through the strategic mobilisation of cultural heritage.

Beyond the highly orchestrated rituals of the opening and closing ceremonies, these mechanisms extend to individual athletes, whose performances and media representations serve as embodiments of national identity. Zhang and Shi (2023) explore the media portrayal of athletes such as Eileen Gu as an extension of China's cultural nationalism, demonstrating how individual sporting achievements can reinforce a shared national consciousness. Similarly, within the broader thematic framework of Beijing 2022, the integration of traditional cultural elements and national symbols into corporate sponsorship materials functioned semiotically, aligning with the symbolic functions observed in ceremonial rituals.

(1) Eileen Gu and Golden Dragon in Anta's Olympic sponsorship

Corporate nationalism is particularly evident in Anta's Olympic sponsorship of Eileen Gu, where traditional cultural symbols were embedded in sportswear design, fostering a sense of national pride and consumer identification. A focus group participant expressed how the visual representation of Chinese heritage influenced their purchasing decision:

"I usually don't wear domestic (Chinese) brands... but after watching the Winter Olympics, I bought a lot of Anta clothing because I saw Gu Ailing wearing a ski suit with a dragon motif on the back. I thought it looked really good, so I bought the same one." (Group 4, Speaker 4)

The "ski suit with a dragon motif on the back" referenced by the speaker refers to the black ski suit featuring a golden dragon design, worn by Eileen Gu during the Big Air competition. The symbolic significance of the dragon in this context is profound, as the dragon has long been a central figure in Chinese cultural identity, representing power, strength, and national pride. The dragon has long served as a marker of imperial legitimacy and cultural unity in ancient China, making its continued presence in public festivities a reaffirmation of national identity (O'Neill, 2024). In contemporary China, the dragon is not just a cultural relic but an active participant in market-driven identity formation (O'Neill, 2024). Therefore, it is not the dragon itself but the belief in its efficacy that sustains its role as a national symbol" (Sleeboom, 2002). The metaphor 'descendant of the dragon' (龙的传人) is strategically employed in Chinese media to reinforce cultural heritage and national belonging (Zhang & Shi, 2023, p. 72). The phrase "descendants of the dragon" has been

historically employed to reinforce collective identity and to link contemporary Chinese individuals to their mythologised ancestry.

According to an interview with Eileen Gu published by Global People, she explicitly acknowledged the deliberate cultural messaging behind her ski gear:

“My snowboard has a dragon on it, and next to it, it says ‘人中之龙’ (dragon among people). All of our Chinese team’s snowboards have this design. I hope to bring Chinese elements to the world through skiing. My ski suit is also self-designed, with a golden dragon painted on the back.”

Gu’s statement highlights the intentional deployment of cultural symbolism in sports marketing, transforming her athletic performance into a visual spectacle of national pride. The golden dragon ski suit quickly gained immense popularity on social media, with fans celebrating its strong cultural aesthetics. Shortly after her victory, Anta—both the official Olympic uniform supplier and Gu’s personal sponsor—capitalised on this fervour by releasing a commercial version of the dragon-patterned ski suit. The garment became an instant consumer sensation, with a subsequent limited-edition T-shirt featuring the same dragon motif selling out within hours.

The rapid commercial success of Gu’s dragon-themed attire exemplifies how corporate branding and nationalistic sentiment have become deeply intertwined in the Chinese consumer landscape. The strategic use of national symbols in branding legitimizes corporate interests while simultaneously reinforcing state narratives of cultural continuity (Sleeboom, 2003). As Ruan (2020, p.5) argues, national identity in China is not merely a political construct but is closely linked to popular culture and media consumption. The surge in demand for Gu’s Olympic attire illustrates how nationalist sentiment, though influenced by state propaganda, is equally shaped by market forces and fan cultures (Ruan, 2020, p.8).

The focus group participant’s purchasing decision—influenced not just by Eileen Gu as an athlete but by the cultural symbolism embedded in her attire—demonstrates how corporate nationalism operates on an affective level. The dragon motif, already an enduring cultural symbol, was further elevated through Olympic spectacle, social media amplification, and commercial availability. “The merging of Gu’s athletic performance with commercial branding demonstrates how corporate nationalism aligns consumer behaviour with patriotic sentiment” (Zhang & Shi, 2023, p. 77). In this process, the boundaries between patriotic

sentiment and consumer behaviour become blurred, reinforcing the idea that participation in nationalistic discourse can be enacted through market engagement.

(2) Eileen Gu and Mulan in Mengniu's Olympic sponsorship

Another compelling example of this phenomenon is Mengniu's Olympic sponsorship campaign, which employed Chinese cultural national symbol by featuring Eileen Gu alongside the historical figure of Mulan. This strategic branding move reflects a broader pattern of corporate nationalism, where commercial entities incorporate traditional cultural elements to enhance their appeal while reinforcing state-sanctioned ideological narratives. The inclusion of Mulan—a symbol of loyalty, filial piety, and national defense under Confucian culture—elevates the advertisement beyond mere marketing, embedding it within a nationalistic framework.

Since the Mengniu advertisement featuring Eileen Gu has been analysed in detail in the previous chapter, this section provides a concise review of its narrative structure and symbolic implications. At the denotative level, the advertisement presents a straightforward narrative, depicting one of Eileen Gu's freestyle skiing challenges alongside an animated representation of herself as Mulan. Referencing *The Ballad of Mulan*, a canonical literary text, it incorporates traditional Chinese motifs to reinforce a sense of historical continuity and valor, invoking deeply embedded cultural memory. Beyond its literal content, the advertisement conveys connotative meanings linked to nationalistic sentiment. Mulan, as a symbol of bravery, loyalty, filial piety, and national defense, embodies the idealized image of Chinese womanhood within Confucian culture, aligning with China's nationalist discourse. The animation of Eileen Gu as Mulan amplifies its affective resonance, forging a symbolic connection between individual sporting excellence and collective national pride. At the mythological level, the advertisement operates within a broader ideological framework of cultural nationalism. Drawing on Barthes' (1972) theory of myth, it constructs a naturalized narrative, where cultural literacy is not merely knowledge but a moral obligation tied to national allegiance. Through visual storytelling and emotional engagement, it reinforces the expectation that serving and fighting for the nation is an inextricable component of individual duty.

Upon viewing the Mengniu advertisement, one participant (Group 2, Speaker 2) compared it to the advertisement of another domestic Olympic sponsor, Yili, stating a preference for Mengniu's approach:

"This Mengniu commercial at least has some Chinese elements. There's an animation about a female hero, which is quite good. It has some Chinese-style elements, and I think it's quite innovative—this kind of approach has been rare before."

This response indicates an appreciation for the explicit cultural representation in advertising, suggesting that nationalistic branding strategies are effective in evoking cultural pride.

However, as the discussion progressed, another participant sought clarification:

"You're talking about the part with Mulan, right?"

At this point, the initial speaker (Group 2, Speaker 2) displayed frustration and self-reproach:

"Yeah, yeah, Mulan. I just forgot for a moment."

A third participant (Group 2, Speaker 5) echoed this sentiment:

"I didn't recognize it either. I forgot what I learned, I should go back and memorize 'The Ballad of Mulan' again."

The focus group participants' self-reproach for forgetting Mulan's story underscores the deep ideological conditioning embedded within China's patriotic education system. As a heroine in Chinese folklore, Mulan embodies Confucian ideals of loyalty, filial piety, and national defense, functioning as a mythological construct that aligns with state-sanctioned nationalist discourse. These representations reinforce the idea that national identity is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality, continuously reaffirmed through cultural narratives and historical memory (Bell, 2003). In this context, myth operates not simply as storytelling but as an ideological mechanism, naturalizing specific national narratives and reinforcing their legitimacy as self-evident truths (Kelsey, 2015).

The participants' reactions go beyond a momentary lapse in literary knowledge; rather, they reflect a profound sense of cultural duty and the fear of failing to uphold their

heritage. This response is indicative of the broader ideological framework embedded within national education, where students are systematically taught that cultural literacy is an essential component of national identity (Zhao, 2021). As patriotic education emphasizes historical continuity and cultural preservation, forgetting classical literature is not perceived as a trivial omission but as a failure to fulfill one's national duty. The participants' frustration suggests an internalized expectation that maintaining cultural literacy is inseparable from being a responsible citizen (Li, 2024). This expectation does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is the result of sustained ideological conditioning, reinforced through educational curricula, state narratives, and institutional mechanisms. Over time, this pedagogical reinforcement becomes deeply ingrained, extending beyond formal education and shaping how individuals assess their own cultural competence and national allegiance.

China's patriotic education system institutionalizes cultural nationalism through structured pedagogical mechanisms designed to reinforce cultural consciousness and national duty. The role of textbooks as ideological tools is central to this process, as they establish a self-contained framework of cultural knowledge, shaping students' perceptions by embedding state narratives, social control, and nationalistic sentiment (Liu, 2005). These textbooks serve as a means of transmitting dominant societal values, effectively legitimizing state-sanctioned interpretations of knowledge and culture. The politicization of textbook content has become even more pronounced following post-2012 educational reforms, which, rather than focusing solely on pedagogical objectives, were largely driven by political motivations. The re-centralization of textbook production was implemented to ensure that educational materials aligned with Xi Jinping's governance strategies, particularly in reinforcing ideological correctness and state legitimacy (Xu, 2021). In this sense, textbooks function not merely as educational resources but as vehicles for shaping students' understanding of morality, culture, and national identity.

One of the key strategies employed in patriotic education is the prioritization of classical literature, which is integrated into the curriculum from early childhood through secondary education (Mu, 2023). Texts such as *The Ballad of Mulan* are deliberately framed within state narratives that present cultural heritage as a national asset. This pedagogical strategy extends beyond the classroom setting, embedding nationalist sentiment from an early age. Early exposure to classical poetry, for example, plays a crucial role in cultivating

national identity and cultural pride, ensuring that nationalist sentiment becomes internalized at a formative stage of development.

The state also strategically constructs cultural memory through textbook narratives, selectively amplifying or downplaying aspects of Confucianism based on shifting ideological priorities (Xie et al., 2021). This process results in a decontextualized and politically neutralized version of Confucianism, wherein its moral and philosophical tenets are framed as cultural artifacts rather than normative influences on contemporary society.

Beyond the classroom, this ideological conditioning is reinforced through institutional mechanisms that extend into high-stakes examination systems. Students are penalized for errors in poetry recitation and classical text interpretation, effectively codifying cultural literacy as a measurable component of national identity (Li, 2024). Moreover, national commemorations and state-led media campaigns serve to further entrench cultural nationalism, ensuring that the preservation of traditional culture is framed as an intrinsic aspect of patriotism and citizenship.

The psychological impact of this pedagogical framework is evident in the subconscious conditioning of nationalistic sentiment, which extends far beyond formal education into personal identity formation. The participants' distress over forgetting Mulan's story does not merely stem from a fear of academic inadequacy, but rather from a deeply internalized ideological expectation that cultural literacy equates to national belonging. As Barthes (1972) argues, myths serve to naturalize ideological constructs, making them appear self-evident and unquestionable. Within this framework, cultural literacy is not simply knowledge but a moral obligation, and forgetting national symbols such as Mulan is framed as both a personal and collective failure. The participants' self-reproach for failing to recall classical texts demonstrates the power of national narratives in shaping cognitive and emotional responses, reinforcing the idea that cultural memory is a duty rather than a neutral intellectual pursuit.

The influence of media and corporate branding in reinforcing cultural nationalism is a crucial dimension that cannot be overlooked. The media plays a central role in constructing national identity through the semiotic portrayal of heroes, fostering emotional identification with the nation (Kelsey, 2015). In this context, Mengniu's advertisement, which depicts Eileen Gu as an animated Mulan, extends beyond mere product promotion; it strategically

aligns corporate interests with state-sanctioned nationalist discourse (Yang, 2020). By embedding nationalist symbolism within commercial narratives, this corporate co-optation of nationalist sentiment not only enhances consumer engagement but also reinforces the expectation that cultural preservation is both a commercial and civic duty (Zhang, 2024). The participants' reactions reflect this interplay, as their guilt over forgetting Mulan's story stems not only from educational indoctrination but also from the media's reinforcement of cultural myths, which present national identity as a lived and internalized obligation rather than a passive affiliation.

The integration of traditional cultural symbols into both educational policies and commercial media exemplifies a broader ideological project that extends beyond formal schooling. By perpetuating the inseparability of cultural literacy and national identity, these representations facilitate the internalization of nationalist sentiment, shaping both individual consciousness and collective memory. The focus group discussion thus illustrates the intersecting roles of education, media, and corporate branding in shaping national identity, demonstrating how cultural consumption serves as a powerful vehicle for ideological reinforcement (Li, 2024).

In conclusion, the portrayal of Chinese cultural symbols in Olympic sponsorship and ceremonies, whether in the form of the golden dragon on Eileen Gu's Anta ski suit, the image of Mulan in Mengniu's advertisement, or the symbolic elements in the Beijing 2022 opening and closing ceremonies—including lanterns, the mascot Shuey Rhon Rhon, the 24 solar terms, and willow branches—can only resonate deeply with audiences who have undergone an education system steeped in classical literature, traditional culture, and nationalist ideology. These elements are not merely decorative; they function as ideological signifiers, carrying layers of historical and patriotic meaning that have been instilled through structured patriotic education.

The focus group participants' responses to these cultural symbols—whether expressions of admiration, pride, or even guilt for forgetting classical references—serve as qualitative evidence of the effectiveness of this ideological conditioning. Their reactions illustrate how the state's efforts to embed Confucian ideals, nationalist narratives, and cultural heritage into education have shaped not only their cognitive framework but also their

emotional responses to cultural representations. The ability to recognize and emotionally engage with these symbols is not an inherent trait but rather the result of an educational system designed to cultivate a collective sense of cultural literacy and national belonging.

Thus, the integration of traditional Chinese symbols into Olympic branding and national celebrations is not merely an act of cultural representation; it is an extension of the state's ideological project, reinforcing national identity through both educational and commercial channels. The case study of Olympic sponsorship, analysed through the lens of focus group discussions, highlights the intersection of education, media, and corporate branding in shaping nationalist sentiment, demonstrating how cultural consumption serves as a powerful vehicle for ideological reinforcement. The Beijing 2022 Olympics, therefore, did not simply showcase Chinese culture to the world; it also acted as a domestic reaffirmation of cultural nationalism, evoking responses that reflect the depth of ideological internalization among Chinese citizens.

9.4.2.3 Cultural Elements in the Design of Olympic uniforms

Another interviewee discussed the uniform designs worn by officials and volunteers during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics opening ceremony, particularly appreciating their incorporation of traditional elements within a modern aesthetic:

"I really liked the costume design of the opening ceremony. For instance, the outfits worn by the female guides at the Winter Olympics, as well as those of the volunteers. I think, first of all, they were not traditionally Chinese clothes in style, but they incorporated certain ancient Chinese elements alongside new design features. I found the designs very aesthetically pleasing, and the cultural elements were also well integrated." (Group 1, Speaker 4)

The "female guides" mentioned by the speaker refer to those leading the Parade of Nations, each carrying a nameplate for a participating delegation. These guides were dressed in blue-and-white dresses adorned with ink-wash-style depictions of the Great Wall, a design that blended traditional Chinese artistic heritage with a contemporary visual aesthetic. Similarly, the "volunteer uniforms" featured blue ink-wash-style mountain and Great Wall motifs on a white background, and were worn during the flag-raising ceremonies. The speaker's assertion that these uniforms were "not traditionally Chinese" likely alludes to their

departure from historically recognised Chinese garments, such as Hanfu, qipao (cheongsam), or magua (traditional mandarin jackets from the Qing dynasty and Republican era).

The speaker's remarks regarding the "incorporation of ancient elements" and "cultural application" may specifically reference the ink-wash painting motifs and the blue-and-white colour scheme used in the designs. Ink-wash painting is a classical Chinese artistic style, while the blue-and-white palette may evoke associations with "qinghua ci" (青花瓷, blue-and-white porcelain), one of China's most renowned traditional ceramic styles.

Another interviewee also commented on the uniform designs, offering a more detailed interpretation of the three types of uniforms worn by officials, staff, and volunteers during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics opening ceremony. According to this speaker:

"I remember there were three different uniform designs for the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony. In a promo video, they explained it like this: the technical officials wore gray uniforms with an ink wash vibe called 'the Great Wall Gray,' symbolizing their impartiality and professionalism. The staff uniforms were in a bright red called 'Dawn Glow Red,' representing the sun and its rays—kind of showing their enthusiasm and dedication. The volunteers wore 'Blue After the Rain,' inspired by traditional blue-and-white porcelain, symbolising vitality." (Group 4, speaker 3)

The speaker's explanation of the three uniform designs closely aligns with their officially stated design concepts. His or her comments reflect how design choices were understood and contextualised through pre-existing cultural knowledge. By identifying the distinct colour schemes and artistic inspirations behind the uniforms, the speaker linked these elements to Chinese artistic traditions and cultural identity. The integration of traditional ink-wash painting aesthetics and the symbolic meanings of grey, red, and blue enabled the speaker to recognise the deeper cultural and ideological significance embedded within the designs. This observation aligns with Gimeno-Martínez's (2016) argument that national identity is not directly perceptible but is instead mediated through cultural expressions. In this case, the design of the uniforms functioned as a visual and symbolic medium that bridged national identity with national representation (Pan & Kim, 2022).

For Chinese people, ink painting and blue-and-white porcelain are widely recognised as distinctive traditional art forms and intangible cultural heritage. Though these artistic traditions are not exclusive to China, they are often regarded as unparalleled examples of

Chinese craftsmanship. As a result, incorporating these elements into uniform design fostered a sense of cultural belonging, evoking shared traditions while simultaneously instilling national pride. This process is further reinforced by education, where schools highlight the importance of these cultural symbols in shaping collective identity. It is worth noting that the symbolic meaning of the three colours—grey, white, and blue—did not introduce new knowledge to the speaker but instead activated pre-existing cultural knowledge and perceptions stored in their memory. However, the process of attributing deeper meaning to these colours involves a more complex mechanism.

The speaker explained that the grey uniforms worn by technical officials were selected because grey symbolises neutrality and professionalism, which aligns with the officials' role of impartiality and focus. However, the reference to "Great Wall Grey" imbues the colour with deeper cultural significance. The association with the Great Wall evokes not only the physical strength and endurance of the ancient structure but also its status as a profound cultural symbol and national icon. This reference implicitly links the durability and resilience of the uniforms (produced by the sponsor Anta) with the historical endurance of the Wall itself.

The Great Wall of China stands as one of the most significant cultural and historical landmarks in China's material heritage. Beyond its architectural and historical value, the Great Wall serves as an unofficial national symbol, embodying the Chinese civilisation's resilience, unity, and cultural continuity. The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics integrated imagery of the Great Wall into multiple facets of its visual and symbolic representations. Through its presence in the opening ceremony, official uniforms, and the Olympic torch relay, the Great Wall was woven into the narrative of Beijing 2022, offering a compelling illustration of how national heritage can be harmoniously embedded into contemporary international sporting events. The strategic use of this icon reinforced China's cultural identity while aligning with the Olympic values of tradition, innovation, and inclusivity.

Beyond the colour "Great Wall Grey", the pattern and imagery of the Great Wall were also incorporated into the official uniforms of Beijing 2022. The uniforms worn by volunteers, staff, and technical officials integrated Great Wall motifs alongside stylised mountain silhouettes. As He Yang, the designer of the Beijing 2022's uniforms, explained, the visual elements of the uniforms drew inspiration from traditional Chinese landscape painting and the "mountain shapes of the competition zones", combined with the contours of the Great

Wall, which formed a core graphic motif of the Winter Games. The lower section of the uniform jackets featured a perspective-enhanced depiction of the Great Wall, seamlessly blending with the sloping competition zone mountain shapes (China News, 2021). A similar example can be found in the Parade of Nations, where the guides carrying the nameplates for each delegation were dressed in blue-and-white dresses featuring ink-wash-style depictions of the Great Wall. This design choice reflects a fusion of traditional Chinese aesthetics with contemporary Olympic visuals, further reinforcing the cultural symbolism embedded within the uniforms.

The opening ceremony prominently featured the Great Wall in the introductory video showcasing the 24 Solar Terms, a traditional Chinese calendrical system. According to the official International Olympic Committee (IOC) video archive (IOC, 2022), the Great Wall appeared on four occasions:

“Lìchūn” (立春, Beginning of Spring): The ceremony commenced with an atmospheric depiction of the Great Wall shrouded in mist, evoking a sense of antiquity and mystery.

“Jīngzhé” (惊蛰, Awakening of Insects): A sunlit, clear-day portrayal of the Great Wall was presented, symbolising vitality and renewal.

“Dàshǔ” (大暑, Major Heat): This segment showcased a night-time traditional Chinese firework display known as datiehua (打铁花, “iron flower”) at Dajingmen, a significant pass of the Great Wall in Zhangjiakou. The presence of the inscription “Dà hǎo shān hé” (大好山河, Magnificent Rivers and Mountains) further reinforced the connection between the Great Wall and China’s natural and cultural grandeur.

“Dàxuě” (大雪, Major Snow): The final appearance depicted the Great Wall amidst heavy snowfall, signifying endurance and resilience.

As a symbolic site for the Beijing 2022 Olympic torch relay, the Great Wall further solidified its role in the Games. As a key relay location prior to the opening ceremony, it provided a historically resonant backdrop, linking China’s ancient past with the global aspirations of the modern Olympic movement (IOC, 2022).

Historically, the Great Wall was an ancient military defence structure, a tall, sturdy, and continuous barrier built to prevent invasions and delineate borders. Constructing the Wall required immense labour and ingenuity, and it is considered a testament to the intelligence and effort of the Chinese people (Callahan, 2005). The Wall's ability to showcase the exceptional architectural skills and capabilities of ancient Chinese civilisation—the ancestors of modern Chinese citizens—has made it one of their proudest achievements. Consequently, it is often featured in mainstream media and official narratives as a symbol of national confidence and pride.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Great Wall has been universally recognised by Chinese citizens as a national symbol due to its historic and cultural significance. Even those who have never visited the Great Wall are highly familiar with its imagery and meaning, as it is omnipresent in daily life. For instance, the Wall has been depicted on Chinese banknotes, including the 200-yuan note from the first series of renminbi (issued in 1948) and the 1-yuan note from the fourth series (issued in 1987 and circulated until 2005). The fourth series coincided with the formative years of the interview participants (aged 18–45), meaning they would have used or encountered these banknotes during their lifetimes.

Furthermore, the Great Wall is explicitly referenced in the national anthem, *March of the Volunteers*, which includes the line:

"Let our flesh and blood become a new Great Wall..." (gov.cn, 2017).

This metaphor conveys the determination of the Chinese people to fight against oppression, using their sacrifices to create a barrier against external threats. Consequently, the Great Wall is not only a cultural emblem but also a political symbol closely linked to the legitimacy of the People's Republic of China, as it appears on key markers of state authority, including currency and official national symbols.

The Beijing 2022 opening ceremony strategically deployed cultural symbols to craft a modern yet deeply traditional national image, not merely a nostalgic representation of Chinese culture but an effort to redefine national identity in a globalized context (Wang et al., 2024). The integration of cultural symbols (e.g., ink wash painting, blue-and-white porcelain, and red lantern motifs) served to create a coherent national branding discourse.

Additionally, the Great Wall is regarded in China as a representation of national spirit and national image. The emphasis on national image is not only a cultural endeavour but also a political act. Any attempt to construct a national image inherently carries political implications and consequences (Smith, 1991). A widely known modern Chinese proverb states, "He who has never been to the Great Wall is not a true hero." This saying originates from a poem titled Qing Ping Yue: Liupan Mountain written by Mao Zedong, the first Chairman of the People's Republic of China, during the Red Army's Long March on 7 October 1935. Originally titled The Long March Ballad, this poem reflects Mao's sentiments upon reaching the summit.

As the speaker mentioned, the volunteer uniforms featuring the "Blue after the Rain" colour scheme, inspired by the glaze of traditional blue-and-white porcelain. According to the designer He Yang, the blue used in the uniforms not only references the prized Jianan glaze of Chinese ceramics, which resembles the vivid blue of the sky after rain, but also represents the colours of winter sports, aligning with the dynamic and lively image of the volunteers. This design can be interpreted as a strategic effort to project a cohesive national image, emphasising China's unique cultural heritage to an international audience. By incorporating iconic motifs like blue-and-white porcelain, the design aims not only to celebrate China's artistic legacy but also to evoke a sense of unity and pride among its citizens through common cultural legacy, reinforcing the narrative of a culturally confident and globally engaged nation.

The speaker has explained that the staff uniforms, in a shade of red referred to as "Dawn Glow Red," evoke the imagery of a rising sun. This colour, inspired by the winter dawns in Beijing with their warm and hopeful glow, symbolises optimism and vitality. Paired with black, white, and grey, it creates an aesthetic reminiscent of the bright persimmon red found amidst the snowy landscapes of winter, evoking a sense of beauty and auspiciousness. In Chinese culture, red is traditionally associated with luck, joy, and energy, while the "Glow of Dawn" signifies the light of sunrise, a powerful symbol of renewal and hope. This design can thus be interpreted as an embodiment of national pride and collective effort, reflecting the dedication and enthusiasm of those involved in organising and executing the Games.

However, when this red is linked to post-1949 patriotic education in China, it takes on additional layers of meaning. As early as the 1990s, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (1994) issued the Implementation Outline of Patriotic Education, which

emphasised instilling patriotic spirit through the education system. This directive advocated for incorporating patriotic content into subjects such as English, ethics and the rule of law, history, and social studies in primary and secondary schools, as well as innovatively integrating it into relevant higher education courses (Li, 2024).

Following the Reform and Opening-Up period, concrete measures to implement patriotic education in schools included the introduction of political education courses aimed at increasing students' understanding of the nation. These courses focused on official symbols such as the national flag, anthem, and leadership, and on fostering a sense of good citizenship. In Chinese and history classes, the curriculum placed greater emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and the history of the Chinese nation (Fairbrother, 2004).

For instance, in primary and secondary schools, students participate in a weekly flag-raising ceremony every Monday morning. During the ceremony, students raise the national flag and sing the national anthem. In daily studies, Chinese language classes involve learning classical literature and poetry, while history lessons focus on China's history from 3,000 years ago to the present, with particular emphasis on the founding process of the People's Republic of China. In political education classes, students study current policies and ideologies, such as the Socialist Core Values. These elements of patriotic education are essential, and all students are required to memorize and recite, as they are included in high school and college entrance exams, regardless of the student's intended major or university.

The knowledge mentioned in the focus group interviews refers to what students should to learn in schools, including the design concept of the national flag, the history of ink painting and blue-and-white porcelain, historical figures like Hua Mulan, poetry about willows, and speeches and ideologies of leaders such as Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping. These topics are not only studied but also tested in exams, reinforcing their importance in shaping students' patriotic consciousness.

Additionally, starting from first grade (including primary, secondary, and higher education), students both female and male should undergo mandatory military training before their regular courses begin. This training, which lasts from one week to a month, is similar to conscription programs in other countries but is less extensive and shorter in duration. Students are trained by military personnel and undergo both physical training and National

Defense Education (Naftali, 2021) mainly in form of military theory lessons, such as the study of war history and the singing of "red songs" (patriotic songs).

One prominent song is The East Is Red, a revolutionary anthem praising the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its leader, Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution, this song was considered the de facto national anthem and remains part of the curriculum today. The first two lines of the song:

“The east is red, the sun rises; China has produced a Mao Zedong,” illustrate Mao’s portrayal as a savior and a “great liberator of the people.” (Lee, 1995) .

The song reflects the height of Mao’s personal cult during that era, with the imagery of the rising sun symbolizing Mao illuminating the once-dark lands of China.

Since then, the notion of "the east" and the imagery of sunrise have become tightly associated with Mao and the CCP. In this context, the "Dawn Glow Red" of the staff uniforms can be interpreted as an iteration of "the east is red" or "sunrise from the east," invoking similar associations. It symbolizes the CCP’s role in bringing warmth and hope to China's land, akin to the dawn breaking over a cold and dark world. Through this example, the connection between the culturally significant red, patriotic education, and revolutionary songs highlights the CCP’s use of shared symbols and collective memory to reinforce its legitimacy and authority. This integration also strengthens national identity among viewers by evoking a shared cultural and historical narrative.

9.4.2.4 Conclusion

In countries like China, with a rich historical and cultural heritage and intricate socio-political dynamics, patriotic education holds profound implications for the formation of cohesive national identities and allegiance among the populace. On one hand, it plays a significant role in unifying the nation; on the other hand, the government packages the ideology it seeks to instill in the people within cultural contexts, conveying it through the educational process. This is further reinforced through cultural products presented in mass media, such as songs, films, and advertisements, which serve as tools to gauge the extent to which the public has been shaped by cultural discipline, and to re-educate the audience by reinforcing ideologies mediated through culture.

Hayes (1966) draws an illuminating parallel between modern nationalism and religion, arguing that nationalism, much like faith, engages the intellect, imagination, and emotions. The intellect constructs a national mythology, the imagination envisions an eternal past and infinite future, and the emotions cultivate a sense of reverence, belonging, and devotion toward the nation as an almost sacred entity. This quasi-religious function of nationalism is sustained through ritualised public performances—ceremonies, processions, and symbolic acts that reinforce a collective sense of belonging (Hayes, 1966, pp. 217–18, 225, cited by Sánchez-Prieto, 2023). By integrating deeply embedded cultural symbols such as the Twenty-Four Solar Terms and willow branches, the Beijing 2022 Olympic ceremonies transcended mere entertainment, transforming into a semiotic exercise in nationhood. These symbols, while historically and literarily significant, were reframed as diplomatic and ideological instruments, reinforcing China’s soft power ambitions and self-image as a guardian of cultural continuity.

The Beijing 2022 Olympics exemplifies how mega sporting events serve as performative arenas, where semiotic elements are mobilised to construct, contest, and legitimise national identity. Yet, this strategic curation of cultural symbols also raises critical questions about the fine line between cultural nationalism and cultural essentialism. While such symbols ostensibly celebrate China’s rich heritage, do they simultaneously risk reinforcing a rigid and state-defined notion of Chinese identity, thereby excluding or marginalising alternative narratives of national belonging? In the context of global sports diplomacy, does such cultural particularism contribute to a pluralistic global dialogue, or does it erect discursive boundaries, reinforcing cultural exceptionalism rather than mutual understanding?

For Chinese audiences, the ceremonies functioned as an affective trigger, invoking collective historical consciousness and educationally embedded cultural knowledge. The activation of these deep-seated cultural scripts, learned through formal education and state-driven historical narratives, fostered a profound sense of cultural confidence and national pride. This emotional engagement, in turn, reinforced the imagined community of the Chinese nation (Anderson, 1983), strengthening collective identification with the state and reifying a cohesive national ethos.

Ultimately, Beijing 2022 demonstrates the dual function of cultural performance in global sports diplomacy: it celebrates cultural diversity while also consolidating national

identity in ways that serve strategic political ends. As China positions itself as a civilisational power, the Olympics provided a highly curated narrative of cultural distinctiveness, one that speaks both to domestic audiences seeking affirmation of national pride and international audiences as a form of soft power projection. Yet, the question remains: does such a performance invite genuine cross-cultural engagement, or does it risk becoming an insular exercise in cultural self-affirmation?

Thus, the Beijing 2022 Olympics do not simply represent a sporting event, nor even just a national spectacle—they serve as a metaphor for the contested space between national identity and global integration, where history, symbolism, and statecraft converge in an ongoing negotiation of what it means to be Chinese on the world stage.

9.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how national identity in China is constructed not only through overt political discourse but also through everyday symbolic practices. Focus group participants revealed strong affiliations with the Chinese nation, expressed through metonymic language, affective attachments to national symbols, and selective engagement with media representations. National pride was particularly prominent when China succeeded on the global stage, whereas perceived foreignness—even among Chinese-blood athletes—provoked subtle forms of exclusion. The integration of traditional cultural elements into Olympic branding further reinforced national belonging through aesthetic appeal and historical resonance. These findings underscore the utility of semiotic analysis in revealing how ideology is naturalised through language and image. Crucially, this chapter has illuminated how state narratives intersect with market strategies to co-construct a discourse of national identity, where consuming becomes a political act and spectatorship a site of ideological negotiation.

10. Gender Ideologies through the Semiotic Lens: A Focus Group Analysis of the Beijing 2022 Olympics and Sponsorship

10.1 Introduction

Building upon the previous discussion of nationalist ideologies in advertising and interview discourse, this chapter turns its attention to gender ideologies. Like nationalism, gender norms are deeply embedded in both media texts and everyday conversations. In the context of Olympic sponsorship and sports advertising, gender representations intersect with broader socio-political narratives, shaping how athletes, particularly female athletes, are portrayed, perceived, and consumed.

Adopting Roland Barthes' mythological semiotic framework alongside feminist critical discourse analysis, this chapter examines how gendered stereotypes are constructed and circulated in both advertising narratives and consumer responses. Drawing on focus group interviews and branded materials from the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the analysis explores how female athletes are often associated with beauty, emotion, and idealised femininity, while male athletes are more frequently linked to strength, authority, and nationhood.

The chapter begins by analysing how female representation in Olympic advertising is shaped by commodified femininity and patriarchal aesthetics. It then considers the gendered construction of consumption practices, particularly in relation to food and beverage branding. The third section explores how language use in focus group discussions reflects and reproduces gendered hierarchies, while the final section examines the intersection of gender and nationalism in dual advertising strategies, such as those employed by Anta. Together, these analyses reveal how audiences simultaneously internalise, negotiate, and at times resist the gendered ideologies encoded within Olympic brand culture.

10.2 Framing Femininity in Sponsorship Advertising: Gender Stereotypes and the Female Athlete

Stereotypes embody broad assumptions about the characteristics of specific social groups. Walter Lippmann, who introduced the term to the social sciences, described stereotypes as "pictures in our heads"—a concept now recognised as a schema—that simplify perceptions of human groups (Lippmann, 2017). Since then, the term has become quite

common both in everyday discourse and academic research. However, the tendency to associate a particular trait with membership of a specific group often leads to an exaggerated perception of intergroup differences while minimising intragroup diversity (Taylor, 2015). Despite these ongoing debates, there is general consensus that stereotypes extend beyond simple schemas. In addition to their cognitive roles in simplification and categorisation, they influence behavioural expectations and have tangible behavioural impacts (Augoustinos et al., 2014).

In this interview, when discussing Eileen Gu's commercial endorsement advertisements of Estée Lauder, a female interviewee made the following:

“During the Winter Olympics, Estée Lauder suddenly became associated with Eileen Gu as a brand ambassador. At the time, I thought, ‘Wow, the strength conveyed by sports can directly connect with cosmetics.’ Typically, cosmetic endorsements are done by female stars—actors, singers, or hosts—usually in their thirties or forties, to highlight the effectiveness of the product. Eileen Gu, however, is still very young, only 20 years old. It seems that skincare brands are also trying to use athletes to expand into this younger demographic market.....” (Group 2, Speaker 3).

The denotation of what the speaker said is straightforward: a young female athlete endorsed a globally recognised cosmetics brand. However, the connotation reveals a deeper narrative entrenched in gendered cultural norms. This statement reflects three implicit stereotypes: (1) the association of women and cosmetics, wherein female celebrities, rather than male, are deemed appropriate endorsers of beauty products; (2) the occupational stereotype that celebrities in entertainment, not athletes, should represent beauty brands, as the purpose of cosmetics is to enhance appearance, a characteristic culturally attributed to entertainers rather than athletes; and (3) the age stereotype that positions skincare products of Estée Lauder as targeting women in their thirties and forties, rather than younger women like Eileen Gu.

10.2.1 The Societal Expectation for Women to Maintain Beauty

Firstly, the focus is placed on the gender stereotype that links women with the necessity of using cosmetics to maintain desirable appearances. The speaker highlights the “unusual” nature of an athlete representing a beauty brand, contrasting this with the “typical” association of female celebrities—actresses, singers, or hosts—as endorsers. This observation

exposes the first stereotype: the assumption that women inherently need cosmetics to maintain beauty. Such stereotypes are not neutral but reflect a gendered social norm that prioritises women's appearances over other attributes, such as their skills, achievements, or individuality. As Ellemers (2018) argues, gender stereotypes implicitly influence societal expectations, especially in terms of how women are perceived and evaluated. Women, unlike men, are primarily judged based on their appearance, even in contexts where such evaluations are irrelevant (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The cultural linkage between women and beauty products is more than a marketing strategy; it is a reinforcement of societal expectations. Pradhan et al. (2016) discuss how the gender of a celebrity, the gender of the consumer, and the congruity of these identities play a significant role in advertising. Female celebrities are overwhelmingly chosen to endorse beauty products, while male celebrities are often associated with products symbolising power or performance (Cowley & Barron, 2008). This gendered dichotomy perpetuates the belief that women need to prioritise their physical attractiveness to meet societal standards. This stereotype, as evidenced in both consumer culture and media representation, perpetuates broader gender inequalities and spills over into professional domains.

Celebrity endorsement is a widely adopted marketing strategy that relies on public figures to enhance brand credibility and appeal (Liu & Li, 2020; Rifon et al., 2023). However, advertising remains heavily influenced by gender stereotypes. Cross-gender endorsements, where celebrities endorse products traditionally linked to the opposite gender, have been interpreted as an indication of evolving attitudes towards gender roles (Yu, 2024). For instance, Chinese actor Yang Yang's endorsement of lipstick in 2015 was seen as a step towards challenging traditional norms. Yet, such campaigns often target female audiences by leveraging the largely female fanbases of male celebrities, ultimately reinforcing, rather than dismantling, gendered consumption patterns.

This dynamic is exemplified by snowboarder Su Yiming's endorsement of Skinceuticals, a skincare brand primarily catering to women and without a men's product line. Su Yiming, at 17, won silver in Snowboard Slopestyle and gold in Snowboard Big Air at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, becoming China's first Olympic snowboarding champion. As one interviewee noted:

"I have a female friend who's a huge fan of Su Yiming, and she bought the Skinceuticals product he endorsed..." (Group 3, Speaker 3).

Data from Su Yiming's social media following further supports this trend, with 65.9% of his 1.98 million followers being female. The endorsement thus appears aimed less at encouraging men to use skincare products and more at persuading Su's female fans to purchase the products as a way of supporting their idol.

Notably, Skincenticals' advertising strategy for Su Yiming differs markedly from campaigns involving female athletes like Eileen Gu. In Su's promotional video, his appearance aligns closely with his natural state—tanned skin, visible dark circles, dry lips, and minimal grooming. The advertisement focuses on the product's restorative function after sun exposure, presenting Su as a relatable athlete rather than an idealised figure of beauty. In contrast, Eileen Gu's advertisement for Estée Lauder accentuates her physical attractiveness through makeup and polished styling, reinforcing societal expectations for women to maintain an immaculate appearance. This representation echoes what Mulvey (1975) terms the 'male gaze', where the female body is positioned primarily for visual consumption, even in contexts unrelated to sexuality or romantic appeal. As Kelly Oliver (2017) argues, the male gaze continues to shape visual culture by fragmenting and objectifying female bodies, especially through advertising and digital media. This resonates with the portrayal of female athletes like Eileen Gu, whose commercial image is styled and beautified to meet gendered visual expectations.

This contrast is not coincidental but reflects deeper societal expectations. This divergence highlights the persistent gendered double standard in beauty advertising. Female celebrities, even athletes, are often presented as aspirational figures, with their endorsement implying that using the product can help consumers achieve similar levels of beauty. For example, Eileen Gu's endorsement appeals to women with the implicit promise: "If I use this product, I can look as beautiful as Gu." Conversely, Su Yiming's endorsement lacks this aspirational narrative. Instead, his female fans are motivated by the desire to support their idol, not emulate his appearance. This reflects the broader societal context, wherein men, particularly male celebrities, are not subjected to the same level of scrutiny or expectations regarding their physical appearance.

Therefore, this strategy reinforces rather than challenges the stereotype that women are the primary users of beauty products. While cross-gender endorsements appear progressive, they often perpetuate traditional norms by focusing on women as consumers, leaving the idea that women need beauty products to maintain their appearance largely

unchallenged. Ultimately, this reinforces the societal expectation that women, unlike men, must actively engage in practices of beautification to be socially accepted or celebrated.

10.2.2 Sporting Femininity: Athleticism and the Aesthetics of the Female Body

While last section discussed how beauty norms influence the commercial portrayal of female athletes, this section explores how these portrayals intersect with cultural constructions of femininity within sports contexts.

Gender stereotypes in sport have long mirrored broader societal norms, reinforcing occupational and cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. Historically, sports perceived as aggressive and physically demanding have been associated with masculinity, while those emphasising aesthetics and grace have been classified as feminine (Koivula, 2001). This deeply ingrained binary has contributed to the public's surprise when female athletes, particularly those competing in high-risk sports, engage in traditionally feminine activities such as endorsing beauty products. For example, the speaker's astonishment at Eileen Gu's role as a cosmetics brand ambassador reflects the societal expectation that athleticism aligns more with masculinity than femininity (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Research suggests that individuals who defy such stereotypes may be devalued rather than prompting a reassessment of the stereotype itself (Ellemers, 2018). This phenomenon is evident in women working in male-dominated professions, who are frequently regarded as unfeminine (Lee Badgett & Folbre, 2003).

In patriarchal societies, femininity is often defined in opposition to traits commonly attributed to athletes. The concept of gender is often reduced to two opposing categories: masculinity and femininity, shaped by hegemonic ideals set by dominant social groups, such as White, heterosexual, middle-class individuals (Anderson, 2005; Krane, 2001 cited by Paloian, 2012). As Nelson (1998, p. 145) defined, "femininity is not large, not imposing, not competitive. Feminine women are not ruthless, not aggressive, not victorious. It's not feminine to have a killer instinct, to want to win with all your heart and soul to win... Femininity is about appearing beautiful and vulnerable and small. It's about winning male approval." In this framework, women are expected to be thin and toned, while men are expected to be muscular and powerful (Dworkin, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Athletics, historically male-dominated, is associated with strength, aggression, and competition—traits

linked to masculinity (Krane et al., 2004). Female athletes, like Serena Williams or Gina Carano, often face criticism for not fitting the “feminine ideal” as they navigate the masculine qualities of their sports alongside societal expectations of femininity (Dworkin, 2001).

The Olympic Games serve as a microcosm of these gendered perceptions. The 1924 Winter Olympics in Chamonix featured 260 athletes from 16 countries, but only 13 women, who were permitted to compete exclusively in figure skating. For decades, female athletes were largely confined to this discipline until the 1948 St. Moritz Games, when women’s alpine skiing was introduced. Even as female participation gradually expanded, restrictions persisted; at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, women were still barred from ski jumping and Nordic combined, reflecting lingering institutional barriers. However, the inclusion of women’s ski jumping at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics marked a pivotal shift towards greater gender representation in extreme winter sports. Similarly, at the 2012 London Summer Olympics, female athletes were for the first time allowed to compete in all 26 sports, signifying a continued move towards gender parity (Carpenter & Acosta, 2005). Despite this progress, disparities remain, with men and women still restricted from certain disciplines, such as women from Greco-Roman wrestling and men from rhythmic gymnastics and synchronised swimming.

Winter sports continue to reflect traditional gender norms. Greer and Jones (2013) highlight that physically demanding, high-risk disciplines—such as ice hockey, luge, and snowboarding—are typically perceived as masculine, whereas figure skating is categorised as feminine due to its emphasis on aesthetics rather than power (Koivula, 2001). However, freestyle skiing occupies an ambiguous position, blending artistic expression with extreme physical risk. Although studies categorise it as a more feminine-typed sport, its disciplines—halfpipe, slopestyle, and big air—involve high-risk aerial manoeuvres, aligning it more closely with masculine-typed extreme sports. This classification reflects a shifting perception in audience expectations, where certain sports no longer fit neatly within traditional gender binaries.

Freestyle skiing, though not as overtly combative as boxing, remains an extreme sport that demands high levels of physical skill, precision, and risk tolerance. It challenges the conventional association between femininity and “graceful” sports such as figure skating, which are often perceived as less physically strenuous (Paloian, 2012). The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics introduced halfpipe and slopestyle, followed by big air at the 2022 Beijing

Winter Olympics. According to Xu et al. (2021), freestyle skiing recorded one of the highest injury rates among all winter sports, surpassing 15% at the 2014 Sochi and 2018 PyeongChang Olympics, with the majority of injuries classified as moderate to severe. Notably, Eileen Gu competes in all three of these high-risk disciplines, further complicating the association between femininity and her athletic identity.

As an athlete, Eileen Gu embodies a physique that is muscular, strong, and powerful—qualities that starkly contrast with the "vulnerable and delicate" body type traditionally linked to femininity. This divergence from conventional ideals likely contributed to the respondent's surprise at seeing Gu endorse a brand synonymous with femininity, such as Estée Lauder. However, an analysis of the brand's promotional materials reveals a strategic approach: while Gu retains elements of her athletic identity—such as wearing a ski helmet and goggles—the advertisements do not foreground her sporting achievements. Instead, the camera accentuates her flawless skin and meticulously applied makeup, presenting an image far removed from her appearance during Olympic competition. This contrast suggests that the campaign does not seek to challenge traditional notions of femininity by integrating an athletic identity. Rather, it subtly downplays Gu's role as an elite athlete, shifting the focus back to her femininity and, in doing so, reinforcing the enduring stereotype that beauty remains central to a woman's identity.

The advertisement's tagline, which praises its product for being as bold and boundary-breaking as its ambassador, paradoxically conveys a subtle pressure on women to remain impeccably beautiful, even while engaging in physically demanding activities. This reinforces the societal expectation that women, regardless of their context, should prioritise their appearance. Cosmetic advertising, as Barthes' concept of myth highlights, operates on a dual level: denotation and connotation. The denotative message of Estée Lauder's advertisement is that a young and accomplished athlete endorses a beauty brand. However, its connotation normalises the cultural myth that even women at the pinnacle of athletic achievement must prioritise beauty to gain societal approval.

This phenomenon is further reflected in another example from an interviewee, who commented on Gu's appearance in a Mengniu dairy advertisement:

"Although I didn't care much for the ad, Eileen Gu was still quite 'Yang Yan (养眼)'..." (Group 4, Speaker 8).

When describing Eileen Gu, this male speaker used the term Yang yan (养眼), a Chinese phrase with layered meanings, including "good-looking," "eye-catching," and "visually pleasing." Here, the speaker's focus is placed directly on Gu's appearance rather than her athletic performance. Notably, the advertisement showcases Gu performing her iconic 1440-degree rotation with a grab—the trick that earned her fame and secured her championship at the Big Air competition. However, this extraordinary athletic feat was largely overlooked by the speaker, who instead fixated on a few seconds of close-up shots of Gu's face, describing her as Yang yan (养眼). This may reflect the persistent prioritisation of women's appearances over their skills, even when their achievements are prominently displayed. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of admiration for her athleticism, but rather reflects how visual framing and pre-existing gender schemas shape audience attention.

A similar dynamic appears in another audience member's response to a Tsingtao Beer advertisement featuring Gu. As one of the official local sponsors of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, Tsingtao incorporated Olympic athletes into its branding to enhance national visibility and consumer appeal:

"The advertisement (for Tsingtao Beer) looks quite appealing. It's mainly because of her—Eileen Gu's figure is really You Ke Guan Xing ('有可观性', or 'pleasing to look at')."
(Group 2, Speaker 3)

This comment, made by a female respondent, further illustrates how femininity is constructed and consumed through visual cues. On the denotative level, the speaker simply describes the advertisement as visually appealing, attributing its attractiveness to Gu's figure. However, on the connotative level, the phrase You Ke Guan Xing ('有可观性') reflects a deeper cultural logic: the evaluation of a female athlete based not on her accomplishments, but on her physical appearance—a perspective that resonates with the theory of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). While the comment was made by a female respondent, it nonetheless reflects the internalised logic of the male gaze. As Berger et al. (1972) suggests, women often learn to perceive both themselves and others through a socially constructed, male-oriented visual framework. Similarly, based on Oliver (2017), women are taught to gaze at themselves as men would.

Once again, the respondent's attention is drawn not to Gu's athletic prowess or Olympic achievements, but to the aesthetic pleasure derived from her bodily presence. In

Barthes' terms, this constitutes a "myth" within contemporary media: the culturally naturalised belief that even the most powerful women must ultimately serve a visual function. This myth operates ideologically, reinforcing the notion that women's bodies are to be looked at—even when those bodies are engaged in acts of exceptional physical skill. In this reading, Gu's athletic persona is visually subordinated to her bodily aesthetics, which are framed not as signs of strength but as sources of viewer pleasure.

Such responses underscore the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures in media, advertising and everyday conversation, where women's value remains disproportionately tied to their physical attractiveness rather than their abilities. While Gu's athleticism is ostensibly celebrated in these campaigns, the selective focus on her appearance—both in the advertisement's visual framing and the audience's reception—undermines recognition of her skills. Rather than challenging traditional gender norms, these advertisements reinforce the cultural and tragically limiting myth that women, even those excelling in male-dominated fields like competitive sports, are primarily valued for their beauty.

10.2.3 The Beauty Imperative: Age, Advertising, and Feminine Value

As noted earlier, Estée Lauder's use of Gu's youthful image appears to challenge the traditional notion that beauty products are primarily for older women. However, this strategy simultaneously dismantles one stereotype while reinforcing another—namely, that even young women must actively engage in beauty consumption.

While Estée Lauder's decision to feature a young ambassador like Gu challenges the stereotype that skincare and cosmetics are solely for older women, it also creates a new consumerist narrative. By promoting that even young women with flawless skin require beauty routines, the campaign shifts the narrative from addressing age-related concerns to fostering lifelong consumer dependency. This aligns with broader commercial interests, which seek to expand the market by targeting increasingly younger demographics. The shift in messaging further deepens societal pressures, suggesting that women, regardless of age, must strive to enhance and preserve their appearance from as early as possible. This also uncovers a new layer of pressure on younger women, implying that even they must engage with the "beauty economy." By doing so, the advertisement perpetuates the idea that women,

from a young age, must actively invest in their appearance to maintain or enhance their societal value.

Under this system of appearance-based evaluation, women of all ages are not only encouraged but socially obligated to invest in beauty products. This societal expectation, perpetuated by media and commercial interests, transforms women into both the primary audience and consumers for cosmetic advertising. This phenomenon aligns with Sheila Jeffreys' critique in *Beauty and Misogyny*, where she highlights the systemic nature of beauty practices. Jeffreys questions, "What disempowers them about being without their mask?" (Jeffreys, 2005). She argues that societal structures of sexism and male domination compel women to rely on beauty products, creating a discomfort in presenting themselves "barefaced" in public. This discomfort is not empowering but rather a consequence of societal constraints that frame beauty as a necessity for women to be socially acceptable.

In the case of Eileen Gu's endorsement, Estée Lauder challenges occupational stereotypes by featuring an athlete as its ambassador while simultaneously reinforcing gendered expectations that women, regardless of their achievements, must conform to idealised standards of physical attractiveness. This dual narrative—celebrating Gu's athleticism while prioritising her appearance—highlights the broader cultural tension between breaking and perpetuating traditional gender norms.

However, after expressing surprise at Gu's selection as a brand ambassador, the interviewee concluded with the remark:

"It really made me want to try this beauty product..."(Group 2, Speaker 3)

This suggests that the respondent's reaction to the campaign was largely supportive rather than critical, indicating the effectiveness of Estée Lauder's marketing in appealing to consumers. This may reflect how deeply entrenched beauty standards continue to shape societal perceptions of women, as well as how media and commerce perpetuate these norms. Even as women make strides in male-dominated fields, such as professional sports, they remain bound by the societal expectation to maintain a "beautiful" exterior. This underscores the persistent influence of patriarchal structures, which not only uphold but amplify the significance of physical appearance as a key metric of women's societal value.

10.3 Gender and Food Consumption: Cultural Myths in Olympic Beverage

Advertising

Consumer culture serves as a powerful medium for reinforcing gender stereotypes, shaping not only what products are marketed to whom but also dictating societal expectations regarding consumption patterns. While beauty products are primarily targeted at women to maintain femininity, food consumption is also heavily gendered, with certain foods coded as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine.’ These gendered associations of food consumption reinforce broader social norms, dictating how individuals should engage with food based on their gender identity.

10.3.1 Sipping Gender: Everyday Beverages as Cultural Myths

Every society holds gender role expectations rooted in gender stereotypes, shaping behaviours across various domains. Among these, dietary behaviour plays a central role in human activity, serving not only physiological needs but also providing pleasure and a means of self-expression. Numerous studies in sensory and consumer research have acknowledged the existence of gender differences in food choices and preferences, highlighting how societal expectations influence individual consumption patterns. This intersection of gender and food behaviour offers a critical lens for examining the broader cultural and social constructs surrounding gender roles.

When researchers played two milk advertisements from Olympic sponsors Yili and Mengniu to respondents during focus group interviews, the respondents made the following comments:

"I think maybe people don't take drinking milk too seriously. I feel that girls might prefer milk tea and fruit tea, while boys tend to drink alcohol more often..." (Group 1, Speaker 8).

Denotatively, this speaker is expressing his personal observations regarding beverage preferences. He expressed that he didn't have special preferences of milk consumption, and thought girls may prefer sweet drinks such as milk tea and fruit tea, while boys are more inclined to consume alcohol. Connotatively, however, the statement reproduces deeply rooted gender associations. Although the advertisements positioned milk as a healthy, family-friendly product, the respondent's framing demonstrates how beverage types remain gender-

coded through broader symbolic associations. The act of drinking sweet drink including bubble milk tea and fruit tea are coded as feminine due to their association with sweetness and aesthetic appeal. By contrast, alcohol, which taste spicy, is heavily laden with masculinity, signalling strength, sociability, aggressiveness and virility, as seen in its cultural links to male identity (Rodrigues et al., 2020).

From a Barthesian perspective, this reveals a cultural myth: gender becomes symbolically performed through everyday beverage choices. Femininity is enacted through sweetness and aesthetic consumption, while masculinity is performed through strength and endurance, even in mundane practices like drinking. Although milk is positioned in the advertisements as a health-oriented, neutral beverage, the audience's response demonstrates how products are still interpreted through gendered lenses. This suggests that Olympic sponsorships do not operate in a vacuum but instead intersect with entrenched cultural codes.

Interestingly, in the Chinese context, milk has historically been framed less as a leisure beverage and more as a nutritional necessity. This perspective likely diminishes the gendered connotations of milk, since it is primarily viewed as a means to maintain health and replenish nutrients rather than as a form of recreation, as with milk tea, fruit tea, or alcohol. This utilitarian view of milk may explain why its consumption is less gendered in China. In fact, the Chinese government has even encouraged people of all ages and genders to drink milk daily, further promoting the idea of milk as a neutral, health-related choice rather than a gendered one tied to femininity and masculinity.

Food consumption has long been associated with gender norms. Food plays a crucial role in how individuals assess and interact with one another, connoting identity-expressive and symbolic gender value (Murcott, 1983; Vartanian et al., 2007, as cited by Zuo et al., 2021). Thomas (2016) highlights that food is often linked to gender in people's judgements, with food choices and consumption quantities serving as a form of gendered self-presentation. The concept of food-gender stereotypes refer to societal assumptions about food preferences and the amount consumed, which are shaped by gendered expectations (Vartanian et al., 2007).

The concept of food-gender stereotypes reveal much about the ways in which gender identity is constructed and maintained within society. Conventional binary gender definitions perpetuate power hierarchies by associating femininity with delicate, sweet, and light foods consumed in small, restrained portions, while masculinity is linked to hearty, savoury, and

spicy foods eaten in larger quantities and with gusto (Rodrigues et al., 2020). These gendered food associations reflect deeper societal structures, where food consumption is not just a personal choice, but a form of social gendered performance. This pattern is particularly evident in Western societies, where men are more likely to consume alcohol, a practice often viewed as a masculine behaviour due to its associations with strength, sociability, and virility (Rodrigues et al., 2020). Alcohol consumption, especially in pub culture, serves as a ritualised enactment of masculinity, reinforcing patriarchal values that connect risk-taking and physical endurance to male identity.

Gendered food preferences in the Chinese cultural context are shaped by deep-rooted societal expectations and evolutionary influences. According to Zuo et al. (2021), Chinese society harbours explicit gender stereotypes regarding food preferences: men are associated with masculine foods such as Baijiu, beer, mutton, and beef, while women are linked to feminine foods like milk tea, candy, red jujube, juice, and cake. This reflects the influence of food preferences in reinforcing gender identities. Men's affinity for meat and alcohol, in particular, serves as a means of reinforcing their masculinity and fulfilling societal expectations. The historical roots of drinking culture in China, which is predominantly male-oriented, have cemented alcohol, particularly Baijiu (a traditional Chinese spirit), as a symbol of masculinity. This connection is culturally ingrained, with food-gender stereotypes internalised into the collective unconscious, as evidenced by the Chinese cultural concept of Yin and Yang.

Gendered food choices symbolise gender roles within society. For women, drinks like milk tea or fruit tea reinforce their association with the domestic sphere, symbolising nurture and sweetness, aligning with traditional feminine stereotypes of gentleness and passivity. For men, alcohol consumption signifies strength, power, and independence, particularly in public social spaces. As Rodrigues et al. (2020) suggest, these gendered food norms are shaped by cultural narratives and social contexts. For example, in China's "social drinking culture" or "Drinking Etiquette", drinking alcohol sometimes becomes a competitive ritual where men demonstrate their masculinity through drinking contests, as a way to promote the signing of business contracts (Szto, 2013). The winner is often seen as stronger and more dominant, reinforcing traditional notions of virility and endurance. Research indicates that sugary foods, which are commonly consumed by women under stress, can reduce cortisol levels and release stress, leading to a stronger connection between sweet foods and femininity (Tryon et al., 2015; Zellner et al., 2006).

As theorised by Roland Barthes, this distinction between the consumption of sweet drink and alcohol can be seen as a form of myth—a cultural construct that transforms the everyday act of eating and drinking into a sign of deeper meanings. Barthes (1972) suggests that myths work by naturalising social ideologies, making them appear as self-evident truths. In this case, the association of alcohol with masculinity and sweet drink with femininity becomes a symbolic performance of gender, operating within the larger context of societal expectations about male and female behaviour, forming a cultural myth that is perpetuated and reinforced through social practices.

10.3.2 Maternal Role: Confucian Gendered Symbolism in Olympic-Endorsed Consumerism

Gender roles and stereotypes shape societal perceptions and expectations, influencing behaviours in both public and private domains. In consumer behaviour, particularly within cultures heavily influenced by Confucian traditions, these roles manifest in ways that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and maternal responsibilities. Drawing on interviews and relevant literature, this discussion critically examines how the interplay of gender stereotypes, filial piety, and societal norms shapes consumption decisions, perpetuating gendered expectations and systemic gender discrimination.

In the interviews, participants frequently mentioned familial influence and parental decision-making as central to their consumption habits, even when the questions were not explicitly about family. For example, one interviewee commented:

“The elders in my family think Eileen Gu is an exceptional child—she got into Stanford and became a world champion—so they are more inclined to buy products she endorses...” (Group2, Speaker 6).

Another noted:

“My parents think Eileen Gu is amazing. While they can’t send their children to Stanford, they can buy a carton of Mengniu milk to emulate her success...” (Group1, Speaker 8).

Denotatively, this is a simple expression of admiration for Gu’s success. However, connotatively, it reveals how consumption becomes a symbolic act of aspiration. The milk is

no longer just a nutritional drink—it becomes a metonym for success, discipline, and middle-class respectability. From a semiotic perspective, this demonstrates what Barthes (1972) calls myth: a cultural narrative that transforms a commodity into a sign of social virtue. Mengniu's Olympic sponsorship ads position Gu's image not just as athletic, but as aspirationally ideal—beautiful, successful, and filial. Buying the product becomes a performative gesture of aligning one's family with those ideals.

This reflects broader ideologies in post-reform China, where parents, especially mothers, are tasked with managing upward mobility through consumption. The maternal figure, though seemingly empowered as a decision-maker, is in fact re-inscribed into a Confucian gender role: to nurture, to sacrifice, and to serve family success through invisible labour.

These responses reveal an implicit cultural assumption in China: parents, particularly mothers, make consumer choices to align with aspirations for their children's success. Within this context, consumption becomes a reflection of parental hopes, with children seen as carriers of familial ambition. This reflects the Confucian ideal of filial piety, wherein children are expected to embody their parents' desires and parents are assumed to know what is best for their offspring—even in adulthood.

Interestingly, the influence of parental decision-making was often ascribed specifically to mothers. One interviewee remarked:

“I can't tell the difference between Mengniu and Yili milk. I just drink whatever my mum buys...” (Group2, Speaker 2).

Here, maternal authority in purchasing decisions is highlighted. However, this is not indicative of genuine financial autonomy or decision-making power for women. Instead, it reflects the traditional expectation, deeply rooted in Confucian ideology, that much of a mother's role centres on providing food and fulfilling household duties (Menke, 2017). As described in *The Book of Changes*, “In her central place, she attends to the preparation of food.” These framing positions women's labour as a service to the family, reinforcing their subordination to male-dominated familial hierarchies.

The interviews also reveal how gendered expectations are reinforced through commercial strategies. Products endorsed by figures like Eileen Gu are marketed not just for their practical value but as symbols of aspiration. This reflects consumer goods are positioned

as tools to fulfil parental hopes, especially those tied to academic and personal achievement. While this speaker appear to celebrate parental care for their children, they simultaneously commodify it, placing additional burdens on parents (especially mothers) to perform their caregiving role through consumption. Furthermore, the focus on mothers as decision-makers in such campaigns does not signify gender equity but rather reinforces traditional roles. Mothers are expected to manage household consumption, but their contributions are often limited to familial and domestic contexts, aligning with Confucian ideals of women's submission to familial duties. This dynamic perpetuates a systemic devaluation of women's broader societal and professional potential.

The portrayal of mothers as primary caregivers and decision-makers in consumer contexts is not necessarily empowering. In contrast, there is the intersection of gender stereotypes and maternal sacrifice. As Ellemers (2018) argues, societal stereotypes often cast women as more empathetic and altruistic than men, leading to expectations that they prioritise familial obligations over personal or professional aspirations. In China, these expectations have been exacerbated by the state's family planning policies and the discourse of "nurturing the most intelligent child" through intensive mothering. This discourse places enormous pressure on women to focus their labour and resources on their children's success, often at the expense of their own careers. While fathers remain less affected by parenthood in professional settings, mothers are frequently perceived as less committed and ambitious, facing barriers to hiring, promotion, and education (Correll et al., 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). For instance, studies show that managers are more likely to view family responsibilities as a problem for women than for men, even when both genders report similar challenges balancing work and family roles (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014).

This phenomenon is evident in Chinese society, where the erosion of state welfare provisions has re-segregated the public and domestic spheres. Childcare responsibilities, previously supported by the state, have largely been handed back to women, intensifying their domestic obligations and jeopardising their professional opportunities in an increasingly competitive labour market.

10.4 Linguistic Gender Stereotypes and Sexism

Language serves as a means to represent experience, but as Halliday (1999) assert, the categories and relationships within experience are not inherently “natural.” Language does not passively reflect experience; instead, it actively constructs it through lexical and grammatical choices. In postmodern contexts, the meaning of discourse is not fixed; rather, language plays an active role in shaping reality. This constructionist view is evident in how discourse contributes to the formation of social identities, positioning individuals and groups within specific societal frameworks.

From a constructionist perspective, gender identity is not an inherent or biologically determined characteristic but is instead a product of discourse. This approach challenges essentialist and binary notions of gender, arguing that gender identity is a process constructed through language use (Omoniyi et al., 2011). Language becomes a crucial parameter in defining personal and collective identities. In the context of communication, individuals construct both their own gender identity and that of others through discourse.

Feminist language studies, initiated by Robin Lakoff in the 1970s, laid the foundation for examining how language reflects and reinforces societal gender inequality. Lakoff (1973) argued that differences in male and female speech styles perpetuate power imbalances, with women’s speech characterised as powerless and dependent. Over time, research in this field has evolved, shifting its focus from linguistic differences to the ways discourse actively constructs and negotiates gender identity (Daulet et al., 2019).

In Chinese linguistics, gender identity construction is closely tied to cultural and linguistic norms. The gender concept is based on four key components: cultural symbols, normative statements (influenced by religious, legal, and political doctrines), social institutions, and self-identity. These elements shape speech behaviour and linguistic socialisation, often through culturally embedded gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes are evident in lexical and phraseological fields, proverbs, sayings, and discourse, reflecting their integration into Chinese linguistic consciousness and cultural identity (Yang, 2010; Li, 2002; Daulet et al., 2019).

The construction of gender identity is particularly evident in mass discourse, such as cosmetic advertisements targeting women. Driven by commercial interests, these advertisements not only promote beauty but also subtly construct and reinforce gender

identities. For example, studies by Miao (2017) and Liu and Li (2020) reveal how beauty in Chinese cosmetic advertisements is commodified and objectified, often linked to the advertised product's promised effects. These advertisements perpetuate traditional gender norms by fragmenting and emphasising various aspects of femininity as defined by patriarchal societies. Building on this, the current study analyses interview data to explore how specific Chinese lexical items and descriptions used for women often reflect and reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Words and phrases used to describe women frequently emphasise fragmented aspects of traditional femininity, such as grace, gentleness, or beauty, contributing to the discourse-driven construction of gender identity.

Discourse serves as a primary mechanism for the dissemination and reproduction of ideology. The way people speak both produces and reinforces ways of thinking, which are manipulated through grammatical, stylistic, lexical, and other linguistic choices. As a form of social practice, discourse shapes and normalises gendered ideologies, embedding them deeply within social cognition. These ideologies, pervasive yet often unacknowledged, are reproduced through the choices made within the lexical and grammatical system.

In this study, in discussions surrounding the advertising campaigns of Yili and Mengniu during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, some interviewees expressed viewpoints, attitudes, and personal consumption experiences that revealed underlying gender stereotypes in their language.

10.4.1 Infantilising the Empowered: Gendered Language in Descriptions of Olympic Athletes

"(Su Yiming), as a very young athlete, achieving such outstanding results at one of the world's top events is truly worth learning from and serves as a role model for our younger generation." (Group 4, speaker 2)

"Because I personally think Gu Ailing (Eileen Gu) herself is a well-mannered and well-educated little girl, she is very gracious, and she performed excellently (on the field)..." (Group 4, speaker 2)

The remarks made by the speaker reveal a clear instance of linguistic gender stereotypes through their differing descriptions of Su Yiming and Eileen Gu. Su Yiming was referred to as a "young athlete" and a "role model for our younger generation," terms that align with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of "youth" (15–24 years) and "young people" (10–24 years). These descriptors carry connotations of developmental potential, maturity, and competence. In contrast, Eileen Gu, who at the time of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics was 19 years old—older than Su Yiming, who was 18—was described as a "little girl."

The term "little girl" traditionally refers to female children under the age of 12, making it both factually inaccurate and contextually inappropriate for describing an accomplished 19-year-old athlete. Unlike "young athlete," which suggests capability and responsibility, "little girl" evokes diminishment, infantilisation, and trivialisation. While Su Yiming, the younger of the two, was characterised in terms that highlighted his maturity and role-model qualities, Gu was described in a manner emphasising traditionally feminine traits, such as being "well-mannered and gracious." These attributes align with conventional expectations of femininity but fail to recognise her athletic achievements and competence.

The discrepancy in linguistic gender stereotypes illustrates how language reinforces systemic inequality by infantilising women and attributing greater maturity and authority to men. For example, Huot (2013) demonstrated that terms like "girl" and "woman" significantly influence perceptions of a 26-year-old woman, with "girl" associated with childlike traits and "woman" linked to maturity. However, "girl" was more commonly used for adult females, reflecting societal tendencies to diminish women's perceived competence and authority. Similarly, Von Benzon (2024) highlights the persistence of everyday sexism in UK obstetric care, where patronising language such as calling adult women "a good girl" undermines women's autonomy and reinforces power imbalances. These examples reveal how seemingly subtle linguistic choices perpetuate gendered power dynamics, fostering environments where women's voices are undervalued, and their roles are diminished.

This disparity underscores the implicit bias in language, where men are more likely to be described in terms that reinforce their agency and potential, while women, even in positions of equal or greater accomplishment, are framed through infantilising or gendered terms that diminish their status. Such linguistic choices perpetuate gender stereotypes, reinforcing societal expectations that prioritise traditional femininity over professional or

athletic capability. This analysis highlights how linguistic choices, even in casual discourse, can unconsciously propagate gendered stereotypes. Such language use reflects broader cultural norms and biases that warrant critical examination, particularly in contexts where gender equality is a stated goal.

A similar discursive tendency is evident in another participant's reflection on Gu:

"To be honest, I know all about Eileen Gu's achievements. But I'm not really a fan of how the media constantly report how brilliant this little girl is—it's just too much. It makes me and the people around me feel like she's very distant from us. Because she's so outstanding in every way, to a certain extent, she's been elevated to this almost unreachable height. But in reality, she's just a little girl." (Group 4, Speaker 2)

Denotatively, the speaker comments on the extensive media coverage of Eileen Gu's accomplishments. Connotatively, the speaker expresses fatigue with what they perceive as excessive glorification, resulting in a perceived emotional and social distance between Gu and the general public. Despite acknowledging her achievements, the repetition of "little girl" subtly reinscribes Gu as less threatening—a harmless symbol rather than a formidable athlete.

This commentary invokes the myth of the "perfect female idol"—a consumable symbol of aspirational femininity. Yet, the speaker's ambivalence suggests a deeper cultural discomfort with empowered women who exceed conventional boundaries. The myth both elevates and contains female success: Gu is admired, but only as long as she remains within the confines of infantilised femininity. As Lazar (2006) argues, such "empowered" representations are often commodified and depoliticised, masking the structural conditions that constrain real-world gender equality.

In sum, these responses underscore a persistent pattern in the discursive framing of female excellence, wherein linguistic choices operate as tools of symbolic containment. Through infantilisation and aestheticisation, even high-achieving women are rhetorically anchored to gendered scripts that curtail the emancipatory potential of their success.

10.4.2 linguistic objectification of the concept “woman”

Language plays a pivotal role in constructing and perpetuating societal ideologies, including gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are often "naturalised" within dominant discourse, appearing as common sense and embedding themselves in societal consciousness (Miao, 2017). In this study, the interviews conducted about advertisements during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics provide insight into how linguistic choices reinforce or challenge gender norms, and how language reflects and reproduces gendered ideologies, through the use of gendered markers and descriptors.

The interviews provide clear examples of how linguistic gender stereotypes surface in everyday discourse. One interviewee, for instance, remarked on Eileen Gu's advertisements:

“Because there were so many of her advertisements everywhere before the Winter Olympics, she was described as a ‘genius girl’...” (Group 4, Speaker 6).

The term “genius girl” carries notable gendered connotations. While “genius” is a gender-neutral term that could have highlighted Gu's athletic competence and accomplishments, the addition of “girl” infantilises her, situating her achievements within a framework of youth and femininity as just discussed above. When expressing praise for Eileen Gu's sports performance, the interviewee could have directly called her a "genius", but the interviewee chose to call her a "genius girl" to particularly mark Gu's female identity. These linguistic choice marks Gu's female identity unnecessarily, subtly shifting focus away from her professional capability and framing her success as an exception to gender norms.

Similarly, another interviewee also used terms such as 'little girl' and 'genius girl' to describe Gu:

“Perhaps the older generation in my family would consider Eileen Gu to be a very outstanding little girl. Her personal branding is quite well-curated, right? She's a straight-A student, successful at a young age—a genius girl...” (Group 2, Speaker 6)

This linguistic pattern is not limited to individual usage but is also prevalent in institutional discourse. For instance, in a report of Eileen Gu by official media Xinhua News, she is also described as a “*genius girl*” (news.cn, 2023). However, in a similar report on Su Yiming, also published by Xinhua News, he is referred to as a “*genius athlete*”, not as a “genius boy” (news.cn, 2024). The term “genius athlete,” devoid of gender markers, emphasises Su's abilities and professional status without tying his identity to his gender.

This contrast exemplifies what Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) describe as lexical gender asymmetry, where gender-specific terms such as “girl” or “female” are appended to neutral terms unnecessarily, thereby diminishing the authority or significance of women’s roles. By marking women’s gender in contexts where it is irrelevant, such language reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, framing women’s accomplishments as deviations from the norm, while men’s achievements are presented as standard and authoritative.

While most interviewees used highly gendered terms to refer to Eileen Gu—such as “little girl” or “genius girl”—a contrasting example comes from a female respondent who employed more neutral, athlete-oriented descriptors:

“I think this Winter Olympics produced many rising young athletes, such as Gu Ailing and others... Through the Games, I also learned about various sports and got to know these young athletes...” (Group 2, Speaker 3)

Denotatively, the speaker merely comments on the emergence of new sports talent and expresses an interest in different Olympic disciplines. However, connotatively, her language choices stand out in contrast to other interviewees: she refers to Gu as a “rising young athlete” and “young athlete” —phrases that emphasise athletic potential and collective youth identity, rather than gender or physical appearance. These terms align with performance-based recognition and frame Gu within the broader context of Olympic excellence, not femininity.

This discursive shift suggests the presence of a gender-neutral lexicon, one that avoids infantilising or excessively feminising female athletes. From a semiotic standpoint, it can be interpreted as a minor rupture in the myth of gendered athlete perception. While the dominant myth in Chinese contexts—constructed through terms like “genius girl” or “little girl”—naturalises the link between femininity, youth, and admiration, this speaker’s framing introduces an alternative narrative: athletes as professional individuals first, regardless of gender.

It is also worth noting that this comment came from a female respondent, while the previously analysed gendered labels were used primarily by male interviewees. This contrast raises important questions:

Does the speaker's gender affect their lexical choices and, by extension, their implicit ideological stance?

Are women more likely to resist traditional discursive framings that objectify or infantilise other women?

While one case does not make a general rule, the juxtaposition hints at a possible gendered pattern of discourse production, where women may be more inclined to adopt egalitarian or neutral linguistic strategies in referencing female public figures. This aligns with research in feminist sociolinguistics, which suggests that women, as both speakers and subjects, may demonstrate greater reflexivity in discourse shaped by shared experiences of marginalisation (Cameron, 1992; Holmes, 2008).

Ultimately, this example underscores that while gendered discursive patterns dominate, they are not uncontested. Audience responses—even within the same demographic—can reflect divergent ideological positions, shaped by personal values, identity affiliations, and awareness of gender norms. The presence of such counter-discourses reveals the plurality of meaning-making in Olympic sponsorship reception and opens space for more inclusive, performance-based ways of framing female athletes.

In addition, when discussing Anta's replacement of Adidas as an official partner of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, participants recalled an Adidas advertisement created for the Chinese men's football team during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. In this context, Group 4 participants revealed an implicit gender bias in their language. One participant remarked:

"It [Adidas' advertisement] highlights the development of Chinese football. Even though it's growing slowly, it showcases the player [Chinese football star Zheng Zhi], bringing him into focus." (Group 4, Speaker 5)

Another stated:

"...The 2002 World Cup was the peak of Chinese football... Captain Zheng Zhi in this video has been the best in Chinese football for the past decade. Adidas has strong ties with Chinese football since it was the first to sponsor our national team..." (Group 4, Speaker 4)

These comments reflect participants often defaulted to using "Chinese football" (国足) to signify the Chinese men's football national team. "Chinese football" (国足/中国足球) is synonymous with "Chinese men's football." Although the term of "Chinese football" theoretically encompasses both men's and women's teams, participants exclusively used it to

signify men's football, relegating women's football to a secondary position that required explicit gender marking (e.g., "Chinese women's football"). This asymmetry underscores the patriarchal structure of language, wherein men's activities are viewed as the default representation of national identity.

Language plays a critical role in reflecting and constructing societal ideologies. In China, the linguistic practice of referring to "Chinese football" (国足) as synonymous with the Chinese men's national football team is not merely an individual choice but a widely accepted convention in both society and mainstream media. For instance, official media outlets such as Xinhua News and Beijing Youth Daily frequently use "Chinese football" in headlines and reports to refer specifically to the men's team, while employing "Chinese female football" (中国女足) to denote the women's team. This gendered differentiation positions men's football as the default representation of national identity, while women's football is relegated to a marked category.

The linguistic asymmetry in terms like "Chinese football" and "Chinese female football" highlights the patriarchal ideologies embedded in language. According to Barthes' semiotics, the signifier ("Chinese football") and the signified (the men's national team) are culturally constructed, reflecting societal norms that prioritise masculinity as the default and femininity as the "other." This practice aligns with Prewitt-Freilino et al.'s (2017) concept of lexical gender, where unnecessary gender marking creates asymmetry. In this case, the unmarked term "Chinese football" signifies men's football, while the marked term "Chinese female football" reinforces the notion of women as secondary or exceptional.

Historically, patriarchal societies have normalised male-centric narratives in language. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued in *The Second Sex*, women are often defined in relation to men, positioned as the "second sex" and deprived of independent identity. In linguistic terms, this translates to practices where male roles and identities are framed as universal, while female roles require explicit differentiation. For example, in Chinese, terms like "female doctor" (女医生) or "female poet" (女诗人) are common, while their male equivalents ("male doctor" or "male poet") are rarely used, reflecting the implicit assumption that doctors and poets are male by default.

This linguistic framing is further reinforced by Butler's (1990) performativity theory, which views gender as a series of culturally regulated performances. For example, referring

to men's football as "Chinese football" and women's football as "Chinese female football" is a performative act that reproduces gendered hierarchies, positioning men as the standard bearers of national identity and women as secondary or supplementary. This practice exemplifies how patriarchal norms shape language use, reinforcing male-centric narratives while marginalising women's contributions.

This pattern extends beyond sports discourse. For example, when discussing Mengniu's Winter Olympics advertisement featuring Eileen Gu, one participant highlighted the inclusion of Chinese cultural elements, stating:

"The animation of the 'Nv Xia (女侠)' (female knight) was quite creative..." (Group 2, Speaker 2).

For the denotation, the participant was simply commenting on the advertisement's creative design, using the term "Nv Xia" (female knight).

For the denotation, the speaker was simply commenting on the advertisement's creative design, using the term "Nv Xia" (female knight). However, in the connotative level, the speaker used the gender-marked "Nv Xia" ("女侠" or female knight) instead of gender-neutral "Xia" (knight) to suggest an internalised belief that heroism is implicitly male, and that when a woman occupies this role, her gender must be specified.

In fact, this Mengniu advertisement's narration used the gender-neutral term "Da Xia" (大侠), which means "great knight", "great fighter", or "great hero". However, the speaker rephrased it as "Nv Xia (女侠)", which means female knight or female swashbuckler. In Chinese, terms like "Xia (侠)" or knight seem to be neutral, but are implicitly male, because if the signified person is a woman, the gendered marker like "female" should be added in front of "Xia (侠)". In Chinese, there is not a word or term of "Nan Xia (男侠)" which means "male knight". The absence of a male equivalent, such as, normalises masculinity as the default and frames femininity as a deviation requiring explicit differentiation.

As Barthes (1972) argues, myth operates by naturalising cultural ideologies. In this case, the myth is that masculinity is the normative standard for strength and heroism. Femininity, even when associated with power, must be linguistically marked—as exceptional, deviant, or other. This linguistic practice upholds a patriarchal worldview where women's empowerment is recognised only when framed as an exception to male norms. If Eileen Gu

had been replaced by a male athlete, it is unlikely that the viewer would have felt the need to specify "male knight" (男侠 Nan Xia), because strength is presumed to be male by default.

This linguistic adjustment is not merely descriptive—it reflects how even empowering representations of women are framed within gendered linguistic conventions. As Lazar (2006) notes, discourses of “power femininity” often repackage traditional gender roles in ways that appear progressive but remain tied to patriarchal expectations. In the case of Mengniu’s ad, the speaker used term “Nv Xia” (female knight) might seem to celebrate female strength, yet the need to modify the gender-neutral “Da Xia”(great knight) reveals that women’s power must still be qualified. It does not subvert gender norms, but rather reinforces them by presenting female agency as a marketable spectacle—something extraordinary, not ordinary.

In conclusion, linguistic gender stereotypes, as evident in the discourse surrounding Chinese advertising and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, reflect and reinforce patriarchal ideologies. The asymmetry in terms like "Chinese football" and "Chinese women’s football," as well as the infantilisation of female athletes like Eileen Gu, exemplify how language marginalises women and perpetuates traditional gender roles. To address these biases, it is crucial to critically examine and challenge the implicit ideologies embedded in linguistic practices. By recognising the power of language in constructing social reality, societies can take meaningful steps toward dismantling systemic gender inequality.

10.5 Negotiating Nationalism and Feminism: Anta’s Dual Narrative in Olympic Sponsorship

In contemporary Chinese consumer culture, advertising has evolved beyond its functional role to promote products and brands, but to become a performative site of ideological production. As the present study shows, advertisements are received not as neutral messages but as culturally saturated texts, actively interpreted and negotiated by audiences. This negotiation often reveals the ideological fault lines embedded in branded narratives—particularly when those narratives attempt to align disparate or even conflicting symbolic frameworks.

The campaigns of Anta Sports (an official Olympic sponsor of sports clothing) during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics provide a compelling case of such ideological

convergence. While one advertisement film foregrounded national identity and collective pride—embodied in the slogan “Love sports, China has Anta”—a second campaign highlighted individual female empowerment, with celebrity athlete Gu Ailing (Eileen Gu) and the slogan “Love sports, make girls more *Sa* (飒).” This juxtaposition of nationalist and feminist appeals within a single brandscape raised questions among focus group participants regarding consistency, sincerity, and strategic intent. More than a matter of promotional aesthetics, this case reveals how contemporary brands operationalise intersecting ideologies for market segmentation, while eliciting complex audience responses that illuminate the tensions between nationalism and feminism in China’s branded culture.

10.5.1 Anta’s Dual Messaging and the Semiotics of Incoherence

A male participant (Group 4, Speaker 8) expressed clear confusion and criticism regarding Anta’s advertising strategy. He pointed out that the brand’s two campaigns respectively emphasised “national identity” and “female empowerment,” which, in his view, resulted in a sense of “incoherent positioning.” He remarked:

“In its first advertisement, Anta used the slogan ‘Love sports, China has Anta.’ This clearly reflects an ambition to highlight how the brand is connected to certain aspects of Chinese culture or characteristics. It also carries the implicit message that Anta wants to go global, which is why it emphasises its national identity—possibly to evoke a sense of supporting domestic products, especially in the context of the China–US trade war. But in the second advertisement, they chose Eileen Gu and used the slogan ‘Love sports, make girls more Sa (飒).’ That one seems to advocate for a kind of spirit or attitude—encouraging female independence and a love for sports. So, in my opinion, Anta hasn’t really figured out where it wants to position itself. If a brand wants to leave an impression, it should give people a consistent feeling from beginning to end. But Anta goes one way in one moment, then switches to something else in the next, and people don’t really know what kind of lasting impression it’s trying to make. If it wants to appeal to female consumers, then why emphasise patriotic slogans like ‘China has Anta’? Are women necessarily the most enthusiastic group within the patriotic demographic? Not necessarily.” (Group 4, Speaker 8)

The male participant (Group 4, Speaker 8) provided a particularly incisive yet revealing critique. Denotatively, he noted that Anta’s two campaigns appeared to promote distinct and seemingly incompatible values—on one hand, the collectivist ethos of

nationalism; on the other, the individualist rhetoric of gender empowerment. His remark, "Anta hasn't figured out where it wants to stand... one moment it's this, the next it's something else", reflecting frustration with what he perceived as narrative inconsistency. However, his criticism goes beyond surface-level brand coherence: it encodes a deeper ideological discomfort with the coexistence of feminist and nationalist symbols within a single commercial frame. Connotatively, this dual messaging creates a sense of narrative incoherence, producing a perceived tension between national identity and gender independence. The brand appears to speak from two ideological positions simultaneously, prompting confusion and scepticism among certain viewers.

Most notably, his comment of "*Are women in the patriotic group necessarily active? Not necessarily.*"—offers a powerful site of critique. This seemingly offhand remark exposes a latent bias: a presumption that patriotic affect is naturally male-coded, and that female expressions of nationalism are peripheral or conditional. It is a linguistic gesture of ideological gatekeeping—a rhetorical move that questions whether women "truly belong" within the imagined community of national loyalty. At the level of myth, the male participant's critique gestures toward a deeper cultural belief: that feminist rhetoric, when deployed within state-endorsed or nationally symbolic commercial campaigns, lacks authenticity and serves primarily as a strategic device for market segmentation. This points to a broader ideological myth embedded in consumer nationalism—namely, that to embrace feminism is, implicitly, to deviate from the imagined norm of "being Chinese." Such a myth reveals the gendered exclusivity of nationalist discourse in commercial settings, where the boundaries of acceptable identity are still shaped by patriarchal assumptions about who can—and cannot—represent the nation.

This view inadvertently echoes the broader historical trend in many nationalist discourses, wherein women are symbolically figured as bearers of the nation (as mothers, caregivers, reproducers) but rarely recognised as autonomous political agents of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The participant's statement is not merely a critique of branding inconsistency; it is an instance of what Spivak (1988 cited by Brunner, 2021) might call "epistemic violence": the foreclosure of women's political subjectivity within the national narrative.

At the symbolic level, what this male participant objects to is not only a duality of messages, but the idea that a female-empowerment narrative—particularly one built around

“sa” (a performatively “cool” femininity)—can legitimately occupy the same ideological space as nationalist pride. The two, in his reading, are not merely “different”; they are incongruent, even mutually exclusive. Yet as Page (2006) notes in her semiotic reading of Kohler’s advertising, commercial representations of gender often rely on ambiguous symbolic cues that ‘interpellate’ the viewer across multiple ideological registers. In Anta’s case, this multiplicity is not simply aesthetic—it is the site of consumer identity contestation.

Based on Barthes’ myth theory, the male participant’s critique exemplifies a mythological reading: feminism is decoded not as an emancipatory reality, but as a commodified narrative deployed for market segmentation. This resonates with Lazar’s (2006) theory of “power femininity”, whereby empowerment is not enacted but stylised—presented as a visual and lexical aesthetic divorced from its emancipatory potential. In this context, the message “Love sports, make girls more sa” appears less as an invitation to freedom than a call to conform to a new normative identity: the energetic, desirable, brand-aligned female subject.

From this angle, the male participant’s response may be read not just as brand confusion, but as ideological unease at the pluralisation of national identity. His scepticism is not simply about message coherence, but about whether feminism, in any form, is compatible with the sacred terrain of patriotic marketing. As Banet-Weiser (2012) points out, neoliberal brand culture increasingly accommodates multiple identity claims not to advance their causes, but to fold them into the logic of consumer segmentation. Feminism, nationalism, environmentalism—all become modular ideologies, attached and detached from products as needed.

The result is a form of ideological modularity—a brand’s ability to offer what appears to be inclusivity, while maintaining market-focused strategic alignment. The male respondent’s critical reading inadvertently exposes this flexibility as suspicious: if feminism and nationalism can be so easily toggled, are they sincere commitments or simply consumer “masks”?

10.5.2 Tolerating the Trend: Strategic Readings of Feminist Branding by Female Audiences

In contrast to the scepticism voiced by the aforementioned male participant (Group 4, Speaker 8), a female respondent from the same focus group (Group 4, Speaker 6) expressed a markedly more tolerant and pragmatic stance towards Anta's dual messaging strategy. When asked about the seemingly contradictory narratives promoted in the brand's Olympic sponsorship campaigns—one emphasising national pride, the other championing female empowerment—she responded:

“Personally, I don't think there's any real conflict between Anta's first advert saying 'Love sports, China has Anta' and the second, more female-focused one. I think the women's advert is probably just jumping on a trend. Like that shampoo or body wash ad I saw before—it also said that women can be more free, more independent, have more choice. While I don't think this message perfectly fits Anta's product, I still think the values they're promoting are OK. I was a little drawn to it, actually—I even shared it on my Moments. So I don't think a brand has to go all-in on one thing. Sometimes it's fine to go with the flow if it aligns with a current trend.” (Group 4, Speaker 6)

Denotatively, this participant explicitly states that she accepted and even reshared the Eileen Gu-themed advertisement. This literal action demonstrates a positive engagement with the campaign despite its inconsistencies. At the connotative level, her interpretation acknowledges the ideological opportunism behind the advert—namely, that it leverages contemporary gender discourse for strategic visibility. Yet she simultaneously affirms the cultural value of “freedom” and “female independence,” suggesting a strategic tolerance for commercial messaging that resonates with her own beliefs, even if the product-message alignment is tenuous.

This response illustrates a powerful example of what may be termed the myth of strategic feminism in consumer culture. Even when feminist discourse is acknowledged as trend-driven and commercialised, it retains emotional and symbolic resonance. The respondent's attitude exemplifies the domestication of feminist ideology within branded communication—a myth wherein “following the trend” becomes not only acceptable but even desirable, so long as the ideological signal aligns with progressive values.

This engagement typifies what Banet-Weiser (2012) theorises as branded activism, where the consumer-citizen is no longer defined by participation in collective struggle, but by the alignment of their identity with commercial expressions of political values. The respondent's decision to share the advert, despite perceiving its ideological superficiality, reflects how brands cultivate an "authentic self" not through ideological coherence, but through symbolic resonance.

Significantly, the concept of "Sa" (飒)—used in the campaign slogan "Love sports, make girls more Sa"—becomes the focal point of Anta's gendered appeal. In contemporary Chinese vernacular, Sa is a gendered aesthetic that blends confidence, charisma, and performative toughness, often with militaristic or heroic undertones. While it appears to disrupt traditional femininity (i.e., the docile, virtuous *xianqiang* figure), its application here reintroduces normative discipline under a modern guise.

Rather than subverting gender norms, "sa" (飒) installs a new behavioural and aesthetic template—one that is sporty, visually compelling, and, crucially, commercially viable. As Lazar (2006) critiques through the concept of power femininity, empowerment in such campaigns is not enacted but stylised. It is an aspirational image, not a radical political intervention. Thus, the empowered woman in this context is not one who freely determines her path, but one who performs agency within narrowly sanctioned consumer scripts: she is athletic, conventionally attractive, and product-aligned.

Eileen Gu's public persona is particularly amenable to this construction. As a multilingual, glamorous, high-achieving figure straddling both Chinese and American identities, she is rendered the ideal vessel for "sa" (飒). Her image signifies cosmopolitanism, discipline, and style—all within the bounds of market-friendly feminism. In Foucault's (1977) terms, she exemplifies a subject who is not liberated from power, but rather produced by it—her sa-ness shaped by aesthetic and ideological norms that govern what "empowered" should look and feel like.

In this light, the campaign does not dismantle gendered expectations; it merely updates them. The cage of docile beauty is replaced by one of spirited athleticism. While the aesthetic has changed, the disciplinary function remains intact. The deeper danger here, as Banet-Weiser (2012) warns, lies in the tendency of neoliberal brand culture to absorb and commodify political values—not to advocate for them, but to translate them into marketable

forms. This is not ideological advancement, but what might be called emancipation-by-design: the illusion of freedom within a pre-approved aesthetic matrix.

Ultimately, the female participant's response reveals a form of strategic negotiation in contemporary consumer culture. While she recognises the campaign's opportunism, she does not reject it. Rather, she embraces the symbolic cues that resonate with her identity, even if their ideological substance is diluted. This reflects the ambivalent logic of postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), in which feminist rhetoric is recontextualised as lifestyle branding. Empowerment, in this formulation, is not political agency but the right to feel seen—through the consumption of symbolically charged commodities.

Another female participant (Group 4, Speaker 2) offered a similarly candid assessment of Anta's dual campaign strategy. In contrast to the ideological discomfort expressed by some male respondents, she embraced the co-existence of divergent narratives within the brand's promotional framework:

“I think what Anta did was essentially make two different adverts—if you love China, you buy Anta for the country; if you prefer something more aesthetic, more feminine, more about girl power, then you go for the second one. You see Eileen Gu in that ad, you relate to it, and then you buy the product. Either way, the outcome is the same: you end up buying Anta.” (Group 4, Speaker 2)

Denotatively, the respondent identifies Anta's strategy as dual-pronged, targeting different consumer groups with tailored ideological narratives. Whether motivated by nationalism or feminism, the consumer is ultimately guided toward the same consumption outcome. Connotatively, her comment reflects a consumer awareness of brand segmentation strategies—specifically, how symbolic appeals are deployed not as ideological commitments, but as marketing tools to maximise audience capture. The juxtaposition of nationalistic and feminist discourse is thus read not as a contradiction, but as a deliberate and effective act of audience targeting.

Underlying this statement is the myth of depoliticised pluralism—the notion that divergent or even opposing ideological positions can be harmonised within the commercial sphere, so long as they serve the overarching goal of consumer engagement. This myth constructs an illusion of ideological neutrality, whereby political values such as patriotism and gender empowerment are stripped of their critical potency and recontextualised as mere

aesthetic options. In this view, nationalism and feminism are no longer opposing worldviews like the first male participant thought, but interchangeable brand scripts.

This response typifies what Banet-Weiser (2012) identifies as the rise of the branded political activist, wherein civic participation is no longer oriented around collective struggle or systemic critique, but reimagined through the lens of individualised consumption choices. As she puts it, consumers are invited to “do good by buying good” (pp. 140–141). Anta’s bifurcated campaign structure exemplifies this cultural logic: it facilitates ideological alignment not through action, but through brand-mediated symbolic identification.

The divergence in participant responses also reveals a deeper discursive tension within China’s contemporary branded culture. Male respondents were more inclined to question the authenticity and coherence of the feminist message, particularly when juxtaposed with nationalistic imagery. For them, feminism appeared as a narrative intrusion upon the ideological “purity” of patriotic branding. Female participants, by contrast, tended to exhibit greater tolerance for this ideological hybridity, interpreting the brand’s engagement with gender discourse as a positive—if strategically motivated—gesture.

This contrast illuminates the symbolic tension between two modes of meaning-making: on one hand, an exclusive logic of national belonging (nationhood as homogenous, masculine, and ideologically bounded); on the other, an inclusive market logic (feminism and nationalism coexisting as brandable identities within consumer culture). Rather than existing in opposition, these discourses become mutually reinforcing within a marketing framework that favours polysemy over ideological consistency.

Therefore, what emerges is a “double-myth structure” underpinning Olympic sponsorship narratives in China—one that fuses consumer nationalism with consumer feminism as complementary symbolic regimes. These myths are juxtaposed within the advertisements themselves, but actively negotiated and reinterpreted within audience discourse. In doing so, they reflect what Banet-Weiser (2012) terms brand culture ambivalence: the ability of brands to integrate and commodify divergent values, not to resolve political tensions, but to render them functionally irrelevant through commercial absorption. Ultimately, the ideological work performed by such campaigns is not to promote feminism or nationalism per se, but to subsume both under the broader imperative of consumer desire.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how Olympic sponsorship advertising in China participates in the construction, reinforcement, and commodification of gender ideologies through language, symbolic consumption, and brand narratives. Drawing on theories of discourse, semiotics, and feminist critique, the analysis reveals a complex interplay between nationalism and feminism, wherein women's empowerment is simultaneously signalled and circumscribed. Female athletes like Eileen Gu are celebrated not purely for their achievements, but within narrow aesthetic scripts shaped by consumer capitalism. Brands such as Anta strategically deploy multiple ideological appeals to target diverse demographics, often resulting in what Barthes terms a "myth"—a naturalised narrative that masks contradictions. The chapter argues that such representations do not merely reflect cultural values but shape them, offering an illusion of progressiveness while preserving patriarchal and nationalist norms. As such, Olympic sponsorship emerges not only as a site of ideological production but also as a space where the tensions between gender, commerce, and nationhood are actively negotiated.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Restating the Aim and Context

This study aims to examine how Olympic sponsorship in China functions not only as a commercial tool, but as an ideological medium through which narratives of national identity and gender are symbolically constructed and circulated. Particularly, it explored how media and corporate advertisements related to Games and Olympic sponsorship during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics created encoded messages aligned with broader cultural and political values, and how these messages are interpreted by audiences.

In China's unique media landscape, market logics intersect with state narratives, providing a compelling context for this investigation. As the Olympic Games continue to serve as platforms for national display, the branding practices embedded within them warrant closer scrutiny—not only for their commercial impact, but for their role in reinforcing or reshaping cultural ideologies. Advertising is not neutral; it works through signs and stories, myth and metaphor, to naturalise particular understandings of who we are, what we value, and what it means to belong to a nation.

Based on semiotic theory and cultural studies, and supported by qualitative methods, this research focused on two key aspects of meaning-making: the encoding of symbolic narratives by Olympic sponsors, and the decoding of these narratives by Chinese audiences through focus group discussions. In doing so, the study aimed to uncover how media and advertising operate as a subtle yet powerful force in shaping public imaginaries—especially regarding nationhood and gender—in a rapidly transforming socio-political context.

11.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study addressed two core research questions:

- (1) How are national identity and gender ideologies constructed through Olympic sponsorship advertising in China?
- (2) How do Chinese audiences interpret and respond to these symbolic messages?

Through a semiotic analysis of two video advertisements—produced by Yili and Mengniu for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics—and a series of focus group interviews with

Chinese viewers, the research revealed several significant patterns in the production and reception of ideological meaning.

11.2.1 National Identity in Olympic Advertising

Both Yili and Mengniu's advertisements were heavily invested in constructing an idealised version of national identity. Through the use of national and cultural symbols—such as red flags, snowflakes, temple roofs, traditional patterns, and historical references—the ads reinforced a sense of emotional belonging and collective pride. These symbols acted as visual metonyms for the Chinese nation, turning consumer goods (like milk) into carriers of patriotic sentiment.

Yili's campaign emphasised collective strength, hard work, and historical continuity, aligning national pride with athletic perseverance. Mengniu's ad, on the other hand, framed nationalism through emotional narrative and mythic imagination, notably via the figure of Eileen Gu animated as Mulan, merging femininity, heroism, and nationhood.

Language also played a key role: collective pronouns such as “we” and “our” were frequently used to interpellate audiences as part of a unified national community. This aligns with Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, where everyday media artefacts serve to subtly and repeatedly remind individuals of their national belonging.

Yet, the construction of national identity was not monolithic. The two brands encoded different ideological emphases—Yili as rational, disciplined nationalism, and Mengniu as emotional, familial nationalism—highlighting the diverse strategies corporations employ to align themselves with the state-endorsed Olympic project.

11.2.2 Gender Ideologies in Representation

The advertisements also served as sites for gender representation, reflecting and reinforcing socially embedded norms. Male athletes were consistently portrayed as embodiments of strength, control, speed, and national victory. Female athletes, in contrast, were associated with beauty, emotionality, grace, and often with the domestic sphere or symbolic motherhood.

These portrayals reflect persistent patriarchal codes in Chinese commercial media, despite broader societal shifts. For example, the use of soft lighting, nurturing language, and familial metaphors in portraying women contrasted with militarised imagery and heroic framing for male athletes.

However, there were also instances of ideological ambiguity. Mengniu's portrayal of Eileen Gu, animated as Mulan, invoked both feminine elegance and warrior spirit, suggesting a hybrid model of female nationalism. Such imagery resonated with viewers who identified with narratives of empowerment, even as traditional roles were still present.

11.2.3 Audience Interpretation: National identity

The focus group discussions revealed that audiences largely recognised the nationalistic symbolism in the ads and often accepted it with pride. Participants commonly used collective terms—such as “our country”, “our strength”, “our athletes”—suggesting internalised national belonging. Some even interpreted product consumption (e.g., drinking Yili milk) as a micro-patriotic act.

However, viewers were not uncritical. While many embraced the affective power of national imagery, others questioned the sincerity of corporate branding and noted the instrumentalisation of nationalism for commercial gain. Some participants expressed scepticism toward the overuse of patriotic narratives, describing them as formulaic or manipulative.

This points to an important finding: audience readings are negotiated, not merely oppositional or compliant. National symbols were sometimes interpreted with warmth and pride, and at other times with ironic distance or strategic detachment.

11.2.4 Audience Interpretation: Gender ideologies

Participants' interpretations of gender representations also varied. Some accepted traditional gender imagery without question, viewing it as “natural” or “aesthetically pleasing.” However, several younger or female participants actively challenged gendered portrayals, particularly the contrast between strong male and delicate female images. These participants expressed discomfort with the gender binary in Olympic advertising and called

for more authentic and diverse depictions of women, particularly female athletes. Some viewed Mengniu's depiction of Eileen Gu as empowering, while others found it reductive or overly mythologised.

Overall, the discussions demonstrated that gender discourse in contemporary China is undergoing subtle shifts, with increasing sensitivity to representation, inclusion, and feminist perspectives—even if these challenges coexist with entrenched patriarchal norms.

In addition, a section synthesises how national and gender ideologies are both constructed and contested in Olympic sponsorship. It highlights how media and advertising operate as a symbolic field of negotiation, where brand messaging intersects with individual interpretation, producing layered and sometimes contradictory meanings.

11.3 Theoretical Contributions

This research offers several significant theoretical contributions to the fields of semiotics, media and cultural studies, sports marketing, and audience research, particularly in the context of non-Western ideological communication.

11.3.1 Extending Semiotic Theory in a Non-Western Ideological Context

While classical and structuralist semiotics has long been used to decode advertising texts, much of this work has emerged from Western media contexts. This study contributes to extending semiotic theory into a distinctively Chinese ideological and cultural terrain, where corporate communication is deeply entangled with national narratives and state discourse. By analysing Olympic sponsorship campaigns through a semiotic lens, the research shows how signs—such as national flags, collective pronouns, historical imagery, and gendered bodies—carry connotative meanings that align with state-approved myths of unity, strength, and revival.

Importantly, the study also demonstrates how myth, as conceptualised by Roland Barthes (1972), operates in a hybrid commercial-political environment. Here, advertising functions not simply to promote products but to naturalise ideologies through emotionally resonant, visually encoded narratives. The research advances Barthes' theory by demonstrating how myth is mobilised in China's state-influenced branding, where consumption becomes linked with patriotic participation.

11.3.2 Integrating Audience Reception into Semiotic Frameworks

A key innovation of the study is applying semiotic analysis to audience discourse analysis. Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the study treats audience language not merely as opinion but as cultural text—rich with symbolic, rhetorical, and ideological patterns. This reframing allows for a semiotic reading of how meaning is not only produced by advertisers but reproduced, negotiated, or resisted by consumers.

This perspective enriches semiotic theory by highlighting its dialogic nature: signs do not simply transmit meaning—they invite interpretation, contestation, and reconfiguration. In doing so, the study aligns semiotics with broader concerns in cultural studies, particularly the role of agency, positioning, and lived experience in meaning-making.

11.3.3 Advancing Understanding of Banal Nationalism and Gender Representation

Building on Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, the study provides new insights into how everyday advertising media sustain national identity through subtle, repeated symbols and rhetorical tropes. Unlike overt propaganda, Olympic sponsorship works through emotionally resonant but culturally "ordinary" cues—like collective pronouns, colour schemes, and familiar narratives—that reinforce national unity as common sense.

In terms of gender, the study deepens understanding of how gendered myths are sustained and challenged in sports advertising. It brings together insights from Goffman (1979), Mulvey (1975), and Gill (2007) to show how femininity and masculinity are encoded and decoded in the Chinese media landscape. The findings illustrate the coexistence of patriarchal symbolism and emerging feminist interpretation, offering a more dynamic and intersectional view of gender ideology in branding.

11.4 Methodological Reflections

This study adopted a dual-method qualitative design combining semiotic textual analysis with focus group interviews. This combination proved highly effective in exploring the symbolic and ideological dimensions of Olympic sponsorship, both in terms of how meaning is encoded by advertisers and how it is interpreted by audiences.

The semiotic analysis enabled close, detailed readings of visual and linguistic elements embedded in two official Olympic advertisements by Yili and Mengniu. This method uncovered how ideological meanings—relating to nationalism, gender, and cultural pride—are constructed through signs, metaphors, and narrative structure. By focusing on the connotative and mythic functions of imagery and language, the analysis provided insight into how advertisements operate as ideological texts, naturalising particular worldviews.

At the same time, the inclusion of focus group interviews allowed the study to capture the audience's interpretive agency. Participants did not merely describe their preferences; they articulated complex readings that reflected broader social and cultural understandings. Their responses often echoed or contested the dominant meanings encoded in the advertisements, revealing layers of negotiation, ambivalence, and critique. This aspect of the research aligns with cultural studies' emphasis on audiences as active meaning-makers, rather than passive consumers.

By analysing participants' discourse semiotically, the research extended traditional semiotic inquiry into the realm of audience reception, treating their language as symbolic and ideologically informed. This enabled a more dynamic reading of how advertising meaning is co-produced through communication, emotion, and identity positioning.

However, this approach also presented challenges. Managing the subjectivity of interpretation—both in reading the advertisements and in analysing participants' discourse—required continuous reflexivity. The researcher maintained critical awareness of their own positionality, particularly when coding and thematising focus group data. Efforts were made to ensure analytical transparency through memo-writing, cross-checking codes, and iteratively revisiting the data.

The case study design further enhanced the research by grounding it in the specific socio-political context of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. While this may limit generalisability, it allowed for rich, context-sensitive insight into how ideology, branding, and identity intersect in a real-world cultural event.

Overall, the methodological approach succeeded in offering a multi-perspectival account of Olympic sponsorship as symbolic communication, revealing both the structure and reception of ideological meaning in contemporary Chinese advertising.

11.5 Limitations

This study is shaped by a series of boundaries and constraints that define its scope and analytical focus, as with any qualitative research. While the researcher took efforts to ensure methodological rigour and reflexivity, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the research was based on a case study of a single Olympic event—the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. In the part of advertising analysis, only two sponsorship advertisements, one each from Yili and Mengniu were selected to analyse. While these cases were carefully selected for their symbolic richness and national and gendered relevance, their limited number inevitably constrains the range of representational strategies and ideological messages that could be examined. Future research may benefit from a broader sampling of ads across more sponsors, industries, and Olympic cycles to build comparative insights.

Secondly, the study focused solely on 24 Chinese participants, who were organised into four focus groups, each consisting of six individuals. While this approach enabled a deep and context-sensitive exploration of meaning-making within a shared cultural framework, it also constitutes a limitation in terms of breadth. The number of participants and groupings was purposefully designed in line with the principle of data saturation, whereby no substantially new themes or patterns were emerging across successive groups. In other words, the data collected had reached a point of thematic repetition and analytical sufficiency. Nevertheless, the relatively small and culturally specific sample restricts the generalisability of the findings. Given the global reach of Olympic branding, future research may consider incorporating more diverse participant pools and conducting cross-cultural comparisons, which could reveal variations in how ideology is encoded and decoded across different media and national contexts.

11.6 Future Research

Building on the limitations identified in this study, several avenues are recommended for future research to further explore the ideological dimensions of Olympic sponsorship and commercial media discourse.

Firstly, future studies could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample of sponsorship materials. While this research focused on two advertisements from Yili and Mengniu, other Olympic sponsors—both domestic and international—employ different

branding strategies, symbolic repertoires, and cultural narratives. Including a wider range of industries and campaign formats (e.g., print, digital, social media, or long-form documentary advertising) would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how ideological meaning is constructed across platforms.

Secondly, there is strong potential for cross-contextual comparative studies within qualitative and symbolic communication traditions. Future research could explore how Olympic sponsorship is interpreted in other non-Western cultural settings—such as Brazil, South Korea, or India—where nationalism, commercial branding, and media regulation intersect in different ways. Comparative studies could examine how different political ideologies, cultural histories, and symbolic repertoires shape the encoding and decoding of similar Olympic themes. Such work would enrich theoretical discussions on cultural specificity versus symbolic universality in sports advertising.

Thirdly, future studies may benefit from experimenting with alternative semiotic models or schools of thought. While this study adopted a Barthes' mythological and Hall's encoding/decoding approach, other frameworks—such as Peircean triadic semiotics, social semiotics, or multimodal critical discourse analysis—may offer new analytical tools to interrogate meaning-making in media texts. Applying different semiotic traditions could lead to richer or more structurally nuanced interpretations of how Olympic branding constructs ideology across various sign systems and modes (e.g., gesture, layout, typography, or sound).

Fourthly, further inquiry could be directed toward longitudinal studies to explore how audience interpretations evolve over time, particularly in light of changing political climates, advertising trends, and generational shifts. As China's media landscape continues to diversify, examining the intergenerational differences in symbolic literacy and ideological alignment would be especially valuable.

Lastly, future work may explore how intersectional identities (e.g., class, ethnicity, gender, urban–rural divides) shape the decoding of Olympic advertisements. Recognising that audiences are not homogeneous, but situated within varied social contexts, will help uncover the nuanced ways in which ideology is consumed, internalised, or resisted in contemporary media cultures.

7. Final Thoughts

This study has demonstrated that Olympic sponsorship in China is far more than a branding exercise. As shown through the symbolic analysis of Yili and Mengniu's Beijing 2022 campaigns—and the audience interpretations they provoked—advertising emerges as a key site in which meanings of nationhood, gender, and modernity are encoded, circulated, and contested.

By approaching Olympic sponsorship through the lens of semiotics and discourse, the research reveals the ideological density of commercial communication in a state-influenced media context. The advertisements analysed are not simply designed to promote dairy products; they articulate aspirational visions of collective pride, physical vitality, and cultural heritage. In doing so, they participate in the construction of imagined national unity, while also reproducing and negotiating traditional gender codes.

The voices of audiences in this study highlight a critical insight: that ideology is never absolute. Consumers are not merely passive receivers but active interpreters. Their readings—ranging from pride and identification to scepticism and resistance—underscore the dynamic, dialogic nature of media meaning-making. This complexity reminds us that cultural power is always under negotiation, and that even highly orchestrated messages may be reconfigured through everyday interpretation.

In a global media landscape where China's cultural and commercial presence is expanding, understanding how its domestic advertising communicates power and identity is increasingly important. As this thesis has argued, Olympic sponsorship offers a window into the cultural politics of the present, and semiotic research can help better understand the subtle mechanisms through which ideology works in and through media.

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