


Social Media's Transformative Impact on Chinese Gen-Z Girls' Gratifications in Physical Activity

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Abstract

Anchored in uses and gratifications theory, this study investigates how social media is reshaping Chinese Gen Z youths' interpretations of the long-held cultural belief that girls should not participate in sport or physical activities. As Part of a broader study that also involved an anonymous quantitative survey of 722 high school students, this article focuses on the results from four focus groups involving 33 high school students, all of whom also completed the survey. The focus groups revealed a marked gender difference in perspectives about the appropriateness of sport and physical activity for girls outside school contexts. While males report no family opposition to participation, over half the female participants faced some opposition. However, once female participants became teenagers they engaged in information-seeking on social media to gratify their desire for new ideas and information about sport and physical activity. This process of digital information-seeking enabled them to contest and reframe traditionally restrictive gender norms.

Keywords

sport, physical activity, teenage girls, social media, uses and gratifications

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This research emerged from a casual conversation between the first author and a physical education colleague who said, “Girls still shouldn’t study sports because it will make their skin look unattractive and dark.” Her comment reflected a tension between the compulsory requirement in high schools for girls to do physical activity and a widely accepted view in China about the unsuitability of outdoor activity or sport for girls. From the first author’s experience working in PE, the colleague’s views reflected those of many other PE teachers that physical activity is not suitable for females.

Literature Review

Globally, gender is a significant influencing factor in physical activity participation. Research in over twenty European countries shows that men are more active than women (Evans, 2006; Grima et al., 2017; Van Tuyckom et al., 2010.). In China, a similar issue exists. An analysis of four large population samples in 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2014 found that less than 41% of women engaged in regular exercise, defined as working out three or more times a week for at least 30 minutes at moderate intensity (Wang et al., 2015). One of Wang’s (2013) participants expressed the view that even in modernizing cities like China’s capital Beijing, inhabitants still thought that physical activity was “natural” for men and “inappropriate” for women (p. 17).

Gender Roles in China

Gender-differentiated roles have existed in China for generations and limit women’s free time (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Sayer, 2005). Historically, “helping their husbands and children” was the traditional Chinese woman’s role, and she was expected to prioritize her spouse, children and elderly parents over herself (Costa & Guthrie, 1994; Qiu, 2023; Wang, 2013, p. 16). In general, men handled exterior affairs, engaged in hard physical labor (e.g., manufacturing), and made all significant decisions, such as managing finances (Qiu, 2023). These differences meant that men and women had very different amounts of free time, especially after marriage and parenthood (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Sayer, 2005). There are still media outlets in China that spread the idea that a woman’s primary responsibility is to attract a male, which gives their life significance, while men have no need to purposefully lure women (Liu, 2007). According to traditional Chinese aesthetics, before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the ideal female image was fair-skinned, slender, and delicate (Xiong, 2011). Even today, highly specific measurements for shape, weight, and other characteristics—created by men—determine whether a woman is considered beautiful. For example, the desired waist circumference should be no more than the width of an A4 sheet of paper (Wang & Yu, 2017). As “muscle” is linguistically defined as a “male gender characteristic” in Mandarin, females may avoid developing visible muscles (Wang & Zhang, 2012, p. 145). Indeed, the ongoing impact of this view has been experienced by the first author: When she began strength training and built obvious musculature, her family’s response was “A girl shouldn’t have muscle. It is not beautiful.”

As Western culture spread in China in the late 1990s through the growing accessibility of television (Wang, 2015), Chinese women's interest in "beauty" expanded to include exercise as a means of achieving a firm body aligned with ideals of youth, attractiveness, and slenderness (Xiong, 2011, p. 1011). More recently, Chinese social media has exposed women to images of Chinese and foreign women in athletic wear, promoting active and attractive physiques (Cohen et al., 2019; Lee, 2024). In the West, fit women are viewed as successful, and "fitspiration" posts that showcase toned bodies influence women's perceptions of fitness and attractiveness (Boepple et al., 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017). After 2010, women's participation and spending in the sports industry increased rapidly (Chang et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2024). Xiong et al. (2020) found some Chinese women saw exercise as a way to improve health, lose weight, develop personal values, and resist traditional views held by their husbands. By 2022, the four most-followed Chinese fitness influencers on social media were all women (Zhao et al., 2022).

Physical Activity Participation in China

Research on female physical activity in China is lacking, despite the fact that an increasing number of Chinese women are becoming physically active. A keyword search of "female sports participation" [女性体育参与] on China's largest article database, China National Knowledge Infrastructure, produced only 291 results. Further, Cheng et al. (2023) discovered that articles from 1997 to 2023 related to this subject were written primarily for adult females by using CiteSpace, which is a Java program that combines data mining algorithms, bibliometrics, and information visualization techniques to provide an interactive visualization tool for identifying patterns in citation data (Synnøstvedt et al., 2005). CiteSpace is often used for analyzing keyword networks for articles that have been obtained from a database (Chen, 2006).

Despite the lack of emphasis placed on female engagement in physical activity, Chinese professional female athletes have had great success. Their outstanding performances in international events since the 1980s (Riordan & Jinxia, 1996) have enabled them to symbolize the country's glory abroad (Xu et al., 2021). Chinese female athletes have won more gold medals than males in every Olympic Games since the People's Republic of China first participated in the Games in 1984. However, rather than receiving the same respect as males, research found that media typically published pictures of Chinese elite professional female athletes in skimpy clothing to highlight their "sexual attractiveness" rather than their athletic abilities (Billings et al., 2019, p. 244; Chong, 2013; Xu et al., 2018). In addition, the media frequently describes female athletes with extraordinary athletic abilities with terms like "male-oriented style" (Xu et al., 2018, p. 170). Instead of emphasizing their athletic career, the media reports might highlight their other identities, such that of a mother or wife (Wolter, 2015).

Social Media Context in China

The Chinese social media environment is distinctive in both its structure and cultural logic. Unlike the commercially driven open platforms in the West, China's social media operates as a semi-open, semi-controlled system shaped by state regulation, algorithmic control, and cultural values (Xu, 2024; Ye et al., 2025). As of 2024, China had more than 1.09 billion Internet users (95% short-video users) (China Internet Network Information Center, 2024; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025). The four major Chinese social media platforms are Douyin (with over 800 million monthly active users, focusing on short videos and algorithm-driven content), Xiaohongshu (over 300 million users, centered on female and lifestyle communities), Bilibili (around 300 million mostly young users, emphasizing community interaction and interest-based circles), and Weibo (about 500 million users, oriented toward public discussions and celebrity culture)—Together, they constitute a media environment characterized by visuality, algorithmic logic, and social interactivity (China Internet Network Information Center, 2024).

State censorship and the promotion of state-endorsed positivity discourse shape which topics gain visibility, while implicitly marginalizing sensitive issues such as women's bodily autonomy and gender equality (Chang, 2025; Liu, 2025). This tightly regulated and algorithmically curated digital environment places women's bodily and athletic expressions in ongoing tension between social norms and personal agency (Deng, 2023; Hou, 2015).

The continuous balancing between social expectations and personal expression has reinforced and redefined gender distinctions, assigning unique social meanings to women's physical and athletic representations. Research in China indicates that men's sporting content is typically framed around strength, challenge and self-realisation, while women's is more often associated with slimming, toning and maintaining elegance (Guo & Huang, 2025; Peng et al., 2025). Algorithms on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu favour female influencers who embody dominant beauty ideals, reinforcing gendered visibility and reproducing the aesthetic framing of women's bodies as sites of beauty (Lee, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2025). Traditional norms continue to shape perceptions of women's sport participation, with beliefs that women should be quiet and that muscularity is unfeminine persisting both online and within families (Li et al., 2024; Yang & Siu, 2025).

At the same time, social media also offers young women opportunities to reinterpret gender and the body. More and more Chinese girls are following female fitness influencers, joining online communities, and sharing their workouts to explore new values of strength and health, which challenge the belief that sport is unsuitable for women (Lee, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). The dynamics of Chinese social media illustrate its dual role as a site that reinforces gender norms while simultaneously serving as a potential arena for women's self-empowerment (Chang et al., 2018). Recognizing the tension between constraint and empowerment is crucial for analyzing how Gen Z women in China are reshaping their participation in physical activity and their gender identities in the digital environment.

Within this broad context, and recognizing the tension between constraint and empowerment, this study addresses a gap by examining how Chinese Gen Z females and males shape their views of female physical activity participation and gender identities in a digital environment.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Many researchers have studied how media exposure affects audiences, but the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) focuses more emphasis on the audience's selection of media (Donohoe, 1994; Katz, 1959; Ruggiero, 2000). Beginning with research in 1935 on people's motives for listening to the radio (e.g., Blumler, 1979; Cantril, 1935; Katz et al., 1973), the prototype for research that now falls under Uses and Gratifications Theory emerged in the 1940s, while the term itself was coined in 1994 by Wimmer and Dominick (1997, p. 335). The growing popularity of the Internet in the 21st century has led to an increase in studies on the Internet platform preferences of audiences (e.g., Grant, 2005; Grant & O'Donohoe, 2007; Ruggiero, 2000). UGT is thought to be one of the best viewpoints for examining why consumers select various forms of media (LaRose et al., 2001; Ruggiero, 2000). There is some debate about the focus of early research: Wimmer and Dominick (1997) suggest that most was descriptive and focused on classifying the audience's purposes, while other scholars noted that early studies placed too much emphasis on qualitative research, at the expense of systematic data collection and statistical generalization (Katz, 1987; Ruggiero, 2000).

When the Internet became widely used in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was an argument about whether UGT still applied since some scholars claimed that the Internet was completely distinct from traditional media (Kuehn, 1994; Perse & Dunn, 1998; Rogers, 1986). However, social media is considered as a good fit for UGT (Dunne et al., 2010; Grant, 2005; Ruggiero, 2000) because the variety of social media platforms fits a key criterion of UGT research, which is that users select a platform from among several competitors (Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The basic premise behind UGT is that people will choose media over competitors if it satisfies their needs and provides the greatest level of gratification (Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011). Social media enables users to communicate with hundreds, thousands, or even billions of people worldwide on a variety of platforms (Williams et al., 2012). Whiting and Williams (2013) proposed the following 10 gratifications for the application of UGT to social media usage: 1) social interaction; 2) information seeking; 3) pass time; 4) entertainment; 5) relaxation; 6) communicatory utility; 7) expression of opinions; 8) convenience utility; 9) information sharing; 10) surveillance and watching others. After conducting interviews with 25 American social media users, Whiting and Williams (2013) discovered that their top gratifications were social interaction and information seeking.

The use of UGT to explore young people's engagement with physical activity content on social media has also attracted attention. Several previous studies have proposed measuring motivational factors associated with physical activity using UGT. Ilhan and Meiselwitz (2018) collected 445 valid questionnaires in Germany, and the

results showed that users who joined fitness-related Facebook groups were primarily motivated to obtain information—which they indeed gained—while social and entertainment motives were secondary. Another study of U.S. users found that, among diet and fitness app users, recordability, networkability, credibility, comprehensibility, and trendiness significantly promoted continued usage intentions (Lee & Cho, 2017). Recent studies from various countries have extended the discussion to short-video platforms, showing that gratifications such as entertainment, information seeking, self-presentation, and social interaction motivate young users to watch, share, and create fitness-related content (Falgoust et al., 2022; Gu et al., 2022; Meng & Leung, 2021). Recent UGT-based research in China suggests that social media and fitness platforms functions as interactive spaces for active engagement rather than passive consumption of sport content (Jiang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). However, empirical applications of UGT within the Chinese social media context remain limited, highlighting a gap in understanding how young women engage with body and sport related content.

Billings et al. (2019) developed a UGT ‘sport’ scale for comparative research between China and the US. From a Chinese perspective, the use of ‘sport’ rather than ‘physical activity’ does not prevent direct comparisons because these two terms are equivalent in the Chinese context. The following 12 words were used to define the purpose for social media use on this scale: arousal, passing time, camaraderie, entertainment, self-expression, habitual use, escape, information surveillance, building a virtual community, companionship, coolness, relationship building (Billings et al., 2019).

Method

The results in this article come from four focus groups with male (16) and female (17) Chinese adolescents aged between 16 and 19, who were recruited from an anonymous quantitative UGT survey of 722 high school youth about their use of social media content about physical activity. The students came from two schools in different parts of China which represent different stages of economic and social development. The survey focused on their use of social media content about physical activity. They are informal, semi-structured discussions designed to collect data on specific topics (Morse, 1994), such as adolescent boys’ and girls’ views on females and physical activity. Each group was led by the first author, a native Chinese speaker, the semi-structured discussions encouraged participants to express gendered views on females and physical activity in a relaxed, conversational setting (Demant & Järvinen, 2006; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010).

After reading the participant information sheet (PIS), participants gave themselves pseudonyms. All quotations use their pseudonym, followed by F or M to indicate their gender (e.g., Gorilla F). Four 30–40-min focus groups were held in total: two at each school divided by gender. In Guiyang, there were 6 male participants and 7 in the female group. In Shenzhen, there were 10 males and 10 females. Male and female participants were separated into different groups to create a more comfortable

environment that encouraged open discussion about gendered experiences and attitudes toward physical activity. The principals and the physical education teachers gave permission for the focus group to be held during class. The study complied with the requirements of the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC). Given that students self-selected into the focus groups, a limitation is that the discussion primarily represented the views of males and females who stated that they enjoyed being physically active.

At the start of the focus group, each participant was invited to select the phrase that best described their gratification for accessing social media information connected to physical activity, based on their understanding of the relevant concepts gained from participation in the survey: arousal, passing time, camaraderie, entertainment, self-expression, habitual use, escape, information surveillance, building a virtual community, companionship, coolness, relationship building (see [Table 3](#)). Not all questions received verbal answers: some indicated their perspective by raising a hand or nodding. Participants could participate in the discussion at any time, or remain silent. Participants showed the researcher their profiles on social media during the interview.

Each focus group was organised around three main questions: 1) Has your family ever opposed your participation in physical activities and, if so, What are their reasons?; 2) Which one is the best word to describe your emotion or feeling when you follow the content of physical activities on social media? (see [Table 3](#)); and 3) Which activities, in your mind, are typically seen in society as being exclusive to males or females? (see [Table 1](#)). After the discussion, in order to identify social media content that engages Gen Z adolescents in physical activity that attract and engage Generation Z adolescents, the participants were invited to share a link to the page of their favorite physical activity influencers with the lead researcher. Twenty of the 33 participants shared and discussed their favorite influencers: male participants shared only male influencers, while female participants shared both male and female influencers equally.

Results and Discussion

The findings highlight two contrasting perspectives: on the one hand, the constraining role of families and entrenched gender norms in limiting participation in physical activity; on the other, the facilitative influence of social media in encouraging such participation.

Table 1. Participants' Views on Physical Activities That Society Considers Appropriate for Each Gender

Gender	Suitable for males	Suitable for females
Males	Martial arts, boxing, Taekwondo, ball sports, athletics, contact sports	Gymnastics; yoga; dance
Females	All sports	Gymnastics; skipping rope; dance

The Impact of Traditional Views on Female Adolescents' Physical Activity Participation

More than half (10/17) of the female participants acknowledged that their family had discouraged them from engaging in physical activity in the past or present. The female participants reported that their parents and other family members provided a range of reasons why they opposed their female children participating. Three main reasons related to the type of sport--“Wushu (Chinese martial arts) is not something that girls should do” (Gorilla F) -- to where it was appropriate to undertake sport--“outdoor activities are not good for the skin” (Beans F) -- and to concerns about the resilience of female bodies--“females are prone to injury” (Lin F). Most families felt that sports involving physical contact are incompatible with femininity and should only be played by males. Five of the focus group female participants were on their school's Wushu team, and they identified the stereotypes that existed in their families regarding females who participate in Wushu.

For example,

I was interested in Wushu when I was in primary school. My mother asked me if I wanted to keep training after I had been doing it for roughly two years. Although I didn't understand it at the time, other family members claimed that girls weren't very excellent at Wushu. I didn't continue training Wushu because I sincerely believed that girls weren't meant to do it. I didn't recognize for a long time that some biases had started in early life. (Gorilla F)

Another participant, Zheng (F), had a similar experience: “I also want to learn Wushu, but the traditional belief is that Wushu is something that boys should do and fight.”

In other sports that required direct physical contact, the same stereotype — that girls are unsuited for sport — was also evident, as Dreamer (F) explained: “When I was a child, I really wanted to learn Taekwondo, but my family didn't allow it and thought it was a boy's sport.” Beans (F) agreed that the sport was associated with males: “Many people believe that fighting sports require strength, and it is difficult for girls to compete.”

In addition, Conventional Chinese beauty ideals valorize pale skin, leading many families to discourage girls from exercising outdoors for fear of darkening their complexion (Mak, 2007). From ancient times to the present, whitening products have dominated East Asian cosmetics markets, underscoring the premium placed on fair skin (Wu et al., 2020). As Jian (F) lamented, “My elders believed girls ought to focus on their academic pursuits because regular exercise can darken their skin color without providing any benefits.” Similarly, Beans (F) was told that her sun-exposed appearance was “not very beautiful,” and Lin (F) was warned she might “become excessively sunburned.” however, high costs make indoor sports facilities inaccessible for many, forcing most physical activity outdoors--where prolonged UV exposure can cause sunburn, freckles, and premature aging (Wan et al., 2016). Consequently, East Asian women often stay indoors or carry umbrellas when venturing out (Brock et al., 2013), a

practice that contrasts sharply with Western tanning trends facilitated by sunbathing, sunbeds and bronzing products (Abar et al., 2010; Cafri et al., 2009; Hillhouse et al., 1996).

Finally, some parents were concerned that females are more likely to get injured when they play sports. For example, Beans (F) said, "I have scars on my body from falls and other accidents, and sometimes they think that's ugly." Similarly, Lin (F) explained:

They say it's easy to get hurt. When I was a child, I was on a sport team and had to go out to play games, so the training intensity was higher than regular physical education classes, and my family was not very willing to do it. They think girls are prone to injuries. (Lin F)

In contrast, many studies have found that males experience more injuries than females (Farley et al., 2020; Knowles, 2010), so this familial concern may reflect the association of females with traits like sensitivity and affection, rather than violence or bravery (Lopez-Zafra & Garcia-Retamero, 2012).

While teenage girls were very aware of how gender stereotypes impacted their opportunities, many of the young male focus group participants seemed unaware that gender differences existed. In both groups of males, nobody said they were opposed anyone engaging in physical activity. However, in response to the question - "Do you feel that the teenage girl next to you has faced opposition to participating in physical activity?" - all the teenage boys shook their heads to indicate 'no' but said nothing. When prompted further - "For example, your sisters or a friend" - only one teenage boy spoke, and his response indicated that the only reason for parental support was that it provided his sister with entry to university:

My family didn't support my older sister's participation in sports because they believe it is tiresome and meaningless for girls to play sports. She is an athletics student now. Her parents approved when she later attended university to continue her athletic career. (Seven M)

In the male group in Shenzhen which is developed city, it appeared that teenage boys believed the only reason females fail to participate in physical activity is because they don't like it. As YiZ (M) explained, "I feel that girls don't like sports. For example, when there is a physical education class, all the boys run to the court, while the girls run to the convenience store." Another male (KuZ) agreed: "Indeed. Boys rush to play basketball after school, girls flock to the canteen." Their comments are consistent with the first author's observations in her own teaching that no female students were visible on the sports fields during recess while a large number of male students were playing basketball. It was clear from the discussion that barriers to physical activity participation were prevalent among females, yet few male participants were aware of this.

Overall, traditional cultural views remain one of the main obstacles restricting females from participating in physical activity. All participants acknowledged that they unconsciously assumed sports to be gender-specific. When asked to identify sports as suitable for males or females, their selections were remarkably consistent (see Table 1).

Traditional Chinese beliefs state that physical activities appropriate for women are typically seen as slow-paced and gentle. However, when asked about activities that males could do, all participants responded with a wide variety of nearly all-high-intensity sports. According to traditional Chinese views, males were better suited for competitive and team-oriented sports that place more of an emphasis on physical contact, strength, and durability, like baseball and football, while females belonged to aesthetic and personal sports that emphasize skills, elegance, and beauty, like gymnastics (Zou, 2015).

The students' answers reflect ideas about gender differences that are shared in the West. Metheny (1965) was one of the first to explain why certain sports are seen as more appropriate for males or females. In the decades that followed and up until now, sports are more likely to be perceived as "feminine" when they involve elements like elegance and expression (dance, ice skating, gymnastics), and as "masculine" when they involve physical contact and the use of force or heavy objects (rugby, team sports, combat sports) (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 202). Male sports often emphasize physical contact, confrontation, strength, or aggression, while female sports prioritize expressiveness, elegance, or beauty (Chalabaev et al., 2013; Gentile et al., 2018; Hardin & Greer, 2009).

The female participants made an effort to engage while being aware of societal prejudices regarding female physical activity. Despite these prejudices, they remained interested in learning about and doing physical activity. Among the 17 female focus group participants, six reported that they exercised at least three times per week. Two participants exercised daily, and Gorilla (F) said she cycles for at least half an hour each day. Tan (F) said she makes an effort to find opportunities to exercise: "Sometimes I go to the gym and play badminton. If I don't have time to go to the gym, I'll work out in my dorm." Momo (F) said she once planned to become a professional athlete but later gave it up for various reasons. These discussions imply that, although the female focus group members were aware of societal stereotypes regarding women's participation in physical activity, they nevertheless took part. For example, the five female Wushu team members mentioned earlier, despite their families opposing their participation in Wushu during childhood, still chose to join the Wushu team in adolescence. Overall, the evidence suggests that it can be difficult for Chinese females to learn valuable information about physical activity from those around them. Despite these barriers, social media has opened new avenues for women's participation.

The Positive Impact of Social Media on Physical Activity Participation

In contrast to their reluctance to ask physical education teachers and family members for information, female participants indicated a higher inclination to learn about physical activity knowledge via social media. Before the discussion began, the first author invited participants to pick a phrase that best described their gratifications (see Table 2) for consuming physical activity content on social media: arousal, passing time, camaraderie, entertainment, self-expression, habitual use, escape, information surveillance, building a virtual community, companionship, coolness, relationship building. Table 3 reveals the top gratifications for each gender in the focus groups.

Table 2. Explanation of Gratifications

Gratifications	Specific purpose
Arousal	Stimulate senses and arouse emotions
Passing time	Kill boredom
Camaraderie	Establish connections with people with similar preferences
Entertainment	Engaging and enjoyable
Self-expression	Showcasing oneself on social media
Habitual use	Recurrent engagement
Escape	Escaping from offline trivialities
Information surveillance	Current events and attain knowledge
Building a virtual community	Ease of making friends compared to real life
Companionship	Avoid loneliness
Coolness	Not following the crowd
Relationship building	Communicate with friends and family (e.g., share photos)

Females and males exhibited sharply contrasting social media gratifications. For example, 59% of females used social media primarily for information surveillance versus just 13% of males, and entertainment drove 63% of males but only 24% of females. Three gratifications were important for one gender but scored 0% for the other: escape was a motive for 25% of males but 0% of females; passing time accounted for 12% for females but 0% for males; and relationship building appeared for 6% of females and none of the males. These results underscore the finding that females turned to social media chiefly to stay informed and connect, whereas males were more inclined toward enjoyment and diversion.

Females explained that social media provided more professional knowledge about physical activity than physical education teachers or people in their immediate surroundings. For example, “In my view, a lot of elite athletes on social media have greater expertise than physical education teachers and family members. (Lychee F). Jian (F) said, “On social media, I have more options and instant access to the content I desire.” The results suggest that gratifications for physical activity social media content may be different from other kinds of content. For example, none of the gratifications in [Table 3](#)

Table 3. Gender Differences in Gratifications


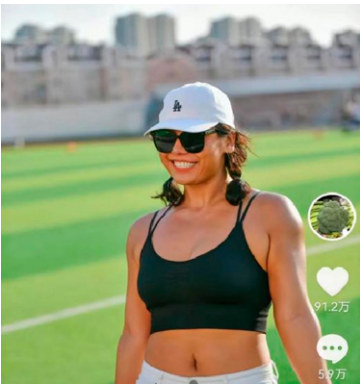
Gender	Gratifications	Number of participants (percent)
Female	Information surveillance	10 (59%)
	Entertainment	4 (24%)
	Passing time	2 (12%)
	Relationship building	1 (6%)
Male	Entertainment	10 (63%)
	Escape	4 (25%)
	Information surveillance	2 (13%)

were found in other studies, in which self-expression was the top choice (e.g., [Dhir & Torsheim, 2016](#); [Pempek et al., 2009](#); [Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014](#)).

Another important gender-based finding was that all male participants favored short-video platforms such as Douyin, whereas half of the female participants preferred the Chinese longer-video platform Bilibili—a site featuring user-generated content over 5 minutes long. Female users valued its higher informational depth and interactive features, which they perceived as superior quality. For example, “I prefer to watch some informative content on Bilibili, and I watch less for entertainment” (Zeb F). The female participants also agreed that short videos were not useful for learning, describing them as “a waste of time” (Lychee F), “a kind of fast-food culture” (Zheng F), and “not deep enough” (Chen F). For Lychee (F), “I think watching short videos is very enjoyable, but in fact, I haven’t learned anything. I enjoy learning knowledge on Bilibili.” For Chen (F), long-video content “is very helpful for skill. And it will deepen my love for an activity, and I think it will be very helpful for myself.” Zheng (F) explained that with short-video platforms, “I spent a lot of time and gained a little. But if I go to a long video, it’s very detailed, and I get a return for the time I put in.”

Despite gender differences in platform preference, all participants followed influencers involved in some form of physical activity. Males’ favorite physical activity influencers (e.g., football and basketball) and all the people they followed were males. Females were interested in both male (fitness) and female (fitness, running, basketball) influencers. The “typical Chinese female aesthetic” (fair, slender and childish) was not exhibited by any of the “cool” or “eye-catching” influencer content that the female participants shared with the first author. Two female influencers most frequently discussed are listed in [Table 4](#).

Table 4. Two Influencers Mentioned by the Most Female Participants

Name	Yang Shuyu	Broccoli (Xi Lan Hua in Mandarin)
Identity	Chinese Women’s basketball team	Physical activity enthusiast
Image source: Douyin		
Followers	4.813 million	2.712 million

At the time of the focus groups, Yang Shuyu was one of the most well-known basketball players in China due to her excellent basketball skills and stylish, unisex apparel. A participant mentioned how much motivation she gets from this professional female athlete. Gorilla (F) said, “She made me think that girls can be charming.” Chestnut (F) said, “After she became popular, many girls also started playing basketball, which has a positive effect. Four female participants mentioned Broccoli [Xi Lan Hua] as the most often talked about social media influencer. She is a physical activity enthusiast who posts pictures of her workouts on social media. Participants were drawn to her non-traditional personality, body type and tanned skin tone.

She looks really optimistic to me. She has provided some extremely positive feedback, but there may also be some negative words in her comments. It pushed to me on Douyin. Then the traditional concept was suddenly broken, I was initially taken by surprise. (Lychee F)

For Zheng (F), “She doesn’t fit the typical tall and slender stereotype; instead, she exudes strength and robust health, challenging conventional social aesthetics at first glance.” Rain (F) noted her tanned skin: “This person must participate in outdoor sports frequently, based on their skin tone, which I find appealing. They also seem to have extremely regular periods, which I find to be extremely jealous of.”¹

Due to insufficient encouragement for physical activity from home and school, the females in this study used social media for positive improvement. Five participants shared that, while they sometimes post photos of themselves exercising on their social media, they don’t share them with their families because “they continue to be an obstacle in the way” (Beans F), perhaps because of the patriarchal nature of Chinese society and the parents and teachers of these participants mostly grew up in the 1980s before China’s large-scale urbanization (Xiong, 2014). Chinese female lifestyles and views have undergone profound transformations as a result of urbanization, accompanied by shifting attitudes toward gender roles and social (Mao et al., 2022) leading to a significant rise in their enthusiasm and opportunities for physical activity (Xiong, 2011). According to the World Health Organization (2018), women’s perceptions of physical activity are crucial for maintaining, promoting, and improving overall health. As such, these Gen-Z participants, the females in particular, have different opinions on the value of physical activity for girls than do older generations.

Conclusions

Although the findings are limited by the nature of this small-scale focus-group study, the results demonstrate gender differences in the gratifications obtained from social media by teenage girls and boys. The lack of support in the girls’ immediate environments sent them to social media for information surveillance to meet their strong desire for knowledge about physical activity. In contrast, boys used social media primarily for entertainment and escape gratifications. These different needs impacted which social media platforms appealed to each gender. Girls were drawn to the longer-form video platform of Bilibili for information, which they could not find on the short-

video platform of Douyin. In contrast, the boys' entertainment and escape needs were better satisfied by the 15-s videos most common on Douyin. There seems real value in exploring these gender differences further to discover how the distinctive features of certain platforms might influence the spread of information about physical activity.

The results also demonstrate the power of social media to provide alternative visions of physical activity. This was especially the case for the teenage girls in this study, whose parents discouraged them from certain physical activities and physical spaces (e.g., outdoors). In this wider social context, social media became their primary source of information because it was difficult to learn about physical activity options from offline sources like family members or PE teachers. However, although female participants were well aware of the social prejudice against female physical activity, they still actively participated. The study found that boys overlooked gender prejudice, attributing girls' lower participation instead to presumed biological differences and a natural lack of interest.

It is encouraging that the female participants are challenging the traditional belief in Chinese culture that 'girls still shouldn't play sports.' For example, Beans (F)'s parents originally believed girls should be gentle and pursue singing or dancing. She persisted, sharing photos and videos of her workouts. Although they still disapprove of her tanning, they now proactively ask about her competition results and express concern for her injuries. Beans's experience illustrates that, even when parents hold traditional constraints on women's physical activity, a daughter's persistence can transform disapproval into genuine, active, supportive engagement. The female participants were aware that women in Chinese culture were expected to be 'gentle' and 'fair-skinned', based on the complaints they received from their family members. However, the social media influencers they follow provided a totally different portrait of what is possible. For female fitness influencers who display traits unlike traditional women -- such as actively engaging in physical activity -- the female focus group participants felt that they represented a progressive trend. As female focus group members Lychee and Rain said, they felt a sense of optimism, strength, and robust health from these female influencers. These discussions definitively show how social media information about physical activity has a positive impact on Chinese adolescent girls' participation in physical activity. And how, when unable to obtain helpful information from their immediate surroundings, Gen-Z females turned to social media as a source to gratify their needs.

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Note

1. The phrase “regular period” (月经规律) in Chinese colloquial usage is a metaphor for women’s vitality and health, rather than a literal reference to menstruation.

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