

Narrating Her Story: Women's Experiences, Gender Dynamics, and Market Influence in China's Curling Industry

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Abstract: Amid the rapid expansion of China's curling industry following the 2022 Winter Olympics, women have played increasingly visible roles as athletes, coaches, managers, and marketers. Yet, little is known about how they experience and negotiate gendered expectations within this evolving sport landscape. This study employs qualitative narrative inquiry to explore how ten women in the Chinese curling sector articulate their professional identities, confront power structures, and engage with market dynamics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants across diverse roles and regions, and thematic analysis revealed three core patterns: (1) participants described gendered pressures to perform both athletic excellence and socially expected femininity; (2) women in leadership positions reported structural biases but strategically used narrative and data to gain credibility; and (3) personal stories were increasingly employed in branding campaigns, enhancing public engagement while raising concerns about commodification. These findings suggest that women's narratives serve both as forms of resistance and as resources for commercial and institutional change. The study contributes to feminist sport scholarship, organizational theory, and gendered marketing practice by illustrating the complex interplay of identity, power, and visibility in an emerging sports context.

Keywords: women in sport, narrative identity; gender and leadership; sport commercialization; curling in China

1. Introduction

Women's participation in sport has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry and public discourse. From Olympic representation to grassroots initiatives, the visibility and portrayal of women in sports reflect broader societal tensions concerning gender equity, institutional power, and cultural legitimacy. While previous research has extensively documented gender disparities in mainstream sports such as football and athletics, emerging sports sectors—such as curling in China—remain significantly underexplored.

The Chinese curling industry has witnessed rapid growth over the past decade, accelerated by the visibility and momentum generated by the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Governmental support, media exposure, and institutional investments have contributed to the commercialization and formalization of curling clubs nationwide. Yet, this expansion raises critical questions about representation: Whose voices are shaping the industry's narrative? Who is included in the emerging discourse? Despite the visible presence of women as athletes, coaches, managers, and marketers, few studies have investigated their lived experiences or the gendered dynamics embedded in this evolving sector.

Feminist sport studies have emphasized the role of narrative in constructing, contesting, and negotiating gendered identities within cultural and institutional contexts. Personal storytelling

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allows women to resist dominant discourses, reclaim agency, and challenge structural exclusions. Similarly, in the domain of sport marketing, narrative has become a powerful branding mechanism—particularly in campaigns targeting female consumers. These insights suggest that narrative is not merely expressive but also strategic, serving as both a form of empowerment and a market asset.

However, in rapidly developing, non-Western contexts such as China, the intersection of gender, narrative, and commercial value remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. Key questions persist: How do women in curling navigate gender norms and power relations? In what ways do their narratives disrupt or reproduce institutional structures? How are these stories leveraged within marketing strategies, and what tensions arise between authenticity and commodification?

This study addresses these questions by employing a narrative inquiry approach to examine how women in China's curling industry construct and articulate their experiences. Focusing on athletes, coaches, managers, and marketers, the research investigates how narratives function as both personal testimony and structural critique. The findings contribute to three intersecting bodies of literature: feminist sport studies, narrative identity construction, and gendered sport marketing. Women in curling navigate intersecting pressures of performance, leadership, and femininity. Their narratives reveal both strategies of resilience and persistent structural constraints. Moreover, these stories serve as powerful tools in branding and sponsorship, illustrating the dual role of narrative as resistance and resource.

By centering the lived experiences and voices of women in curling, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how gender operates within China's evolving sport landscape. It argues for a more inclusive, narrative-driven approach to sport industry development—one that recognizes women not only as participants, but as agents of cultural meaning and market value.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to deeply examine and interpret the experiences and perspectives of women actively involved in China's curling industry. Narrative inquiry, as an interpretive and exploratory approach, enables researchers to understand the subjective and complex realities of individuals through their personal stories, reflections, and accounts of their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specifically, this method facilitated an exploration of how gender dynamics, power relations, and market strategies intersect in the personal narratives of women participants.

Participants were purposefully selected through criterion sampling, ensuring diverse representation across roles within the curling industry, including athletes, coaches, club managers, and marketing professionals. The inclusion criteria were: Female participants with at least three years of professional involvement in curling; Roles in various segments of the industry (athletics, coaching, management, or marketing); Diverse regional representation from major curling hubs in China, such as Beijing, Harbin, Shanghai, and Changchun. A total of 10 female participants were recruited, representing different ages, experiences, and professional backgrounds.

Data collection primarily involved semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews conducted individually with each participant. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed verbatim. Each interview focused on capturing detailed personal stories and reflections around three main themes: Personal experiences and career paths within the curling industry; Perceptions of gender roles, power dynamics, and barriers encountered; Experiences related to market interactions, media portrayals, and brand development strategies involving female participation. In addition to primary narrative interviews, secondary textual materials—such as promotional materials, club marketing strategies, and media reports related to female curling participants—were collected to contextualize and support interview narratives.

NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software was utilized to manage and systematically code narrative data, enhancing analysis reliability and rigor.

3. Results

This section presents the thematic findings derived from narrative analysis of ten women working in China's curling industry. Three key themes emerged through iterative coding in NVivo 12: (1) gendered narratives of identity and experience; (2) organizational power and leadership challenges; and (3) the strategic market value of women's stories. The final coding structure consisted of 24 nodes and 142 coding references, with each theme supported by at least 8 of the 10 participants, ensuring thematic saturation. Selected quotes range from 38 to 112 words, and emotion cues were annotated to capture tone and depth of participant expression.

To protect participant anonymity while maintaining narrative richness, each participant in this study is represented by a color-coded identifier. These color labels (e.g., Participant Red, Participant Blue) correspond to their roles within the curling industry, with no link to actual identities: Red: National-level female athlete; Blue: Regional-level athlete; Green: Curling club manager; Yellow: Curling coach; Purple: Marketing executive.

3.1. Theme 1: Gendered Narratives of Experience and Identity in Curling

This Participants' narratives revealed how gender significantly shaped their professional identities and daily experiences within the curling industry. Several participants described the explicit and implicit gender expectations they encountered. For example, Participant Red, a national-level curling athlete, expressed how gender stereotypes influenced perceptions about female athleticism:

"Many people still see curling as less physically demanding and therefore 'suitable' for women. However, when it comes to professional recognition and resources, male athletes still often have priority. It feels as if we have to constantly prove our worth and capabilities."

Another athlete, Participant Blue, highlighted societal expectations around femininity and its impact on her athletic identity:

"There's always pressure to present yourself as feminine and approachable in public events. Sponsors sometimes directly instruct us on how to dress or behave to fit the brand image, which rarely happens to our male counterparts."

These narratives collectively demonstrated a pervasive, gendered discourse influencing how female participants were viewed within the sport, revealing underlying biases in media portrayals and public perception.

3.2. Theme 2: Power Structures and Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership Roles

Narratives also illuminated significant challenges and opportunities encountered by women in leadership roles within curling clubs and management. Participant Green, a club manager described navigating complex power dynamics in decision-making processes:

"I often feel my opinions and strategies are initially overlooked in leadership meetings. There is still an assumption that men are naturally better leaders. It's only after proving my point multiple times with evidence and persistence that my ideas gain traction."

Participant Purple, a marketing executive, shared similar sentiments, emphasizing how subtle biases impacted her professional growth:

"When I proposed marketing strategies aimed specifically at attracting female audiences, initial reactions from upper management were dismissive. They didn't see female market segments as valuable until data showed increased engagement and profits."

These personal accounts illustrate a significant power imbalance and gender bias within organizational structures, highlighting both systemic barriers and the resilience of women leaders who strategically navigated these challenges.

3.3. Theme 3: The Market Influence of Women's Narratives

Participants' stories further revealed how their narratives shaped market strategies and consumer engagement within the curling industry. Through detailed interviews, it became evident that women's stories could successfully resonate with broader market segments when strategically utilized. For example, Participant Purple, a marketing strategist, discussed a successful brand campaign:

"We launched a series of promotional stories featuring real experiences from female curling athletes. The campaign quickly went viral on social media platforms, significantly boosting our club's membership among young women."

Participant Yellow, a coach, described how highlighting women's empowerment stories improved market appeal:

"We noticed a significant increase in sponsorship opportunities after sharing stories of our female athletes overcoming personal and professional challenges. Sponsors found these narratives authentic and inspirational, aligning well with their corporate social responsibility agendas."

These findings underscore the commercial potential of female narratives, demonstrating their unique capacity to foster emotional connections and brand loyalty, significantly benefiting both commercial success and the broader cultural perception of curling.

4. Discussion

This study explored how women in China's curling industry construct and communicate their lived experiences in relation to gender norms, institutional power, and market engagement. Narrative inquiry, supported by thematic coding in NVivo 12, generated three key themes across 142 coded references and 24 nodes, with high participant representation per theme (8–10 out of 10 participants per theme). Emotional tone analysis revealed recurring sentiments of frustration, persistence, pride, and strategic caution, highlighting both the challenges and agency embedded in women's stories.

4.1. Gendered Experience and the Construction of Identity

These findings affirm the persistent influence of gender norms on the personal and professional identities of female curling participants. As illustrated in Theme 1, participants struggled with dual expectations: to perform athletically while adhering to feminine ideals shaped by external agents, including sponsors and media. These narratives reflect the concept of gender performativity, wherein gender is continuously constructed through social expectations and institutional pressures. In sports, this often results in a paradox: female athletes must be strong yet "graceful," competitive yet "feminine," reinforcing binary structures that marginalize alternative expressions of womanhood.

This resonates with Gard et al. (2024), who argued that female football players in Australia often internalize or resist these imposed identities through community narratives. Similarly, participants in this study navigated identity work in both visible and invisible forms. The tension between visibility and voice—being seen but not always heard—remains a central paradox in women's sports.

4.2. Power and Agency in Organizational Structures

Theme 2 emphasized the underrepresentation and undervaluation of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Despite increased participation, women in this study often described a "prove-it-again" bias—needing to exceed expectations to gain recognition, a phenomenon echoed in Elyasi et al.'s (2024) research on women's sponsorship in sports industries.

From a feminist organizational theory perspective, the curling clubs' internal dynamics reflect deeply embedded gendered power systems that reproduce inequality through informal networks, unconscious bias, and male-dominated leadership norms. Yet, participants

demonstrated agency: strategically leveraging evidence, audience data, and emotional intelligence to reshape perceptions and influence decision-making.

This reflects a shift from seeing women merely as passive subjects of inequality to recognizing their narrative agency—the capacity to define and perform new identities despite structural limitations. Several participants used narrative as a tool of legitimacy, professionalization, and negotiation within male-dominated institutional cultures.

4.3. Market Narratives and Commercial Value

Theme 3 highlighted the strategic importance of women's stories in shaping market engagement. As curling in China transitions toward commercialization, narratives of empowerment, resilience, and authenticity have become valuable assets in audience engagement and brand storytelling. Campaigns built on personal narratives not only resonated with consumers but also aligned with corporate interests in gender diversity and social responsibility.

This aligns with the notion of “marketized feminism”, where feminist values are appropriated for branding and marketing purposes. While this offers new visibility and opportunities for women athletes, it also poses risks of commodification—where women's identities become aestheticized and sanitized for consumption. However, the study's participants appeared aware of this tension and actively negotiated narrative authenticity within commercial frameworks.

Notably, such narrative strategies also have implications for intersectional market segmentation, allowing clubs and brands to access and connect with under-targeted groups—such as young, urban, female consumers who increasingly identify with values of self-expression, equity, and social relevance.

4.4. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study extends feminist narrative inquiry into underexplored domains of emerging sports industries, specifically curling, and demonstrates how gendered narratives shape identity, power, and market strategy simultaneously. It contributes to: Gender studies by showing how sports-based identities are performed and contested; Organizational studies by revealing how women navigate and reshape gendered institutions; Sports marketing by illustrating the value of authentic narrative storytelling in audience engagement.

Practically, the findings offer concrete guidance for curling clubs, sponsors, and media platforms; Prioritize inclusive leadership pipelines for women at all organizational levels; Invest in campaigns that foreground authentic female narratives rather than token representations; Recognize women not merely as participants but as storytellers and market co-creators.

4.5. Limitations

Several limitations merit attention: Sample size and scope: Though purposive and diverse, the small participant pool may limit the generalizability of findings. Including more participants from rural or grassroots contexts could enrich understanding.

Narrative subjectivity: Personal accounts are inherently subjective and may be shaped by memory, self-presentation, or interviewer dynamics. Triangulating narrative data with longitudinal observations or archival media analysis could enhance robustness.

Temporal constraints: The study captures a snapshot in time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to explore how women's narratives evolve alongside policy and market shifts.

Future studies may also explore intersectional dimensions such as ethnicity, age, or sexuality, and examine how these identities interact with gender in shaping curling experiences. In addition, comparative cross-national research could uncover cultural variations in women's sports narratives.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the personal narratives of women in China’s curling industry, focusing on how their experiences reflect broader dynamics of gender, power, and market interaction. Through narrative inquiry, it revealed how women in this emerging sports sector actively navigate identity construction, organizational inequality, and commercial storytelling in gendered ways. The findings demonstrate that women participants are not only shaped by institutional gender norms and power hierarchies, but also act as agents of transformation—reframing their identities and leveraging their stories to challenge stereotypes, shift leadership dynamics, and create new market value. Their narratives expose persistent biases in visibility, representation, and leadership, but also showcase the creative ways in which women negotiate and reshape these constraints to assert presence and influence within the curling industry. Importantly, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of narrative agency, feminist sport studies, and gendered market strategies, while offering practical insights for industry stakeholders. In a rapidly evolving sports environment like China’s, women’s voices and stories hold critical power—not only in contesting inequality but also in shaping future directions of market engagement, brand identity, and cultural legitimacy.

By highlighting the lived and narrated experiences of women across multiple roles—athletes, coaches, managers, and marketers—this research underscores the need for inclusive, narrative-driven approaches in both scholarly analysis and professional practice. Going forward, the integration of gender-equitable storytelling in media, policy, and branding can enrich the curling industry and foster a more diverse, dynamic, and equitable sporting future.

Appendix A

Appendix A. Interview Guide

This interview guide was used to conduct in-depth narrative interviews with female participants involved in various roles within the Chinese curling industry.

Section 1: Background and Involvement

1.Can you tell me how you first got involved in the curling industry?

2.What is your current role, and how has it evolved over time?

Section 2: Gender and Personal Experience

- 3. Have you encountered any gender-specific challenges in your career?
- 4. How do you think gender influences recognition, opportunities, or leadership in curling?
- 5. How do you balance personal identity with public expectations (e.g., appearance, media presence)?

Section 3: Power, Voice, and Decision-Making

- 6. Have you participated in decision-making or leadership roles? What were those experiences like?
- 7. Do you feel your voice is equally heard in your organization or community?

Section 4: Media and Market Dynamics

- 8. How do you think the media portrays female curlers or professionals in the sport?
- 9. Have you been involved in any marketing or promotional activities?
- 10. Do you believe women's stories can influence audience engagement or club development?

Section 5: Future Outlook and Advice

- 11. What changes would you like to see in the curling industry regarding gender equality?
- 12. What advice would you give to young women entering this field?

Table A1. This is a table caption.

Appendix B

Appendix B. Participant Overview

Table B1.

Participant ID	Role	Region	Years of Experience	Level of Visibility	Role Code
Red	National-level athlete	Beijing	8	High	Athlete
Blue	Regional-level athlete	Harbin	5	Moderate	Athlete
Green	Curling club manager	Changchun	10	High	Manager
Yellow	Curling coach	Shanghai	12	Moderate	Coach
Purple	Sports marketing executive	Beijing	7	High	Marketing

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