

A corpus-based comparison of Chinese and Western news reports on doping at the Paris Olympics

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Abstract: This study compares Chinese and Western media reports on doping at the Paris Olympics through two self-compiled corpus and Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis model. It examines how each side constructed narratives around doping incidents. Chinese media employed positive discourse to defend athletes' image, affirm national honor, and question international fairness. Western media, by contrast, used a "performance–controversy" frame to cast doubt on Chinese athletes and link doping to moral and geopolitical tensions. The findings reveal ideological differences and power asymmetries in global sports discourse. The study focuses on mainstream news during the Paris Olympics; future research may explore other media contexts or events.

Keywords: corpus-based discourse analysis; three-dimensional discourse analysis model; doping; Paris Olympics

1 Research background

On August 12, 2024, the Paris Summer Olympics concluded with China achieving its best-ever overseas result—40 gold, 27 silver, and 24 bronze medals. The event once again became a global media spectacle and a battleground for international narratives [1]. International sports events function not only as athletic competitions but also as ideological performances where media framing and emotional cues construct meanings and power relations [2].

Within this context, Chinese athletes' achievements often encounter skepticism from Western media. As Fairclough argues, media discourse shapes ideology through linguistic choices, metaphors, and narrative structures that reconstruct social reality [3]. A typical example is *The New York Post's* coverage of the Chinese men's victory in the 4×100-meter medley relay, which cited two athletes in connection with the trimetazidine case but omitted WADA's conclusions. This selective framing cast China's success as controversial, reinforcing suspicion through terms like "positive test" and "cover-up" in global anti-doping discourse.

In contrast, Chinese media constructed counter-narratives emphasizing transparency, empirical data, and cooperation. Through technocratic language such as "zero positive rate" and collectivist rhetoric like "team spirit", Chinese outlets sought to reaffirm fairness and national dignity while resisting stigmatization [4]. The Paris doping controversy thus reflected a deeper ideological asymmetry: Western media reproduced a "performance–controversy" frame that questioned legitimacy, whereas Chinese media adopted rational and moral discourse to defend credibility. This contrast underscores the enduring inequality of global sports communication and the ongoing struggle for discursive power [5].

2 Research design

This study adopts a comparative corpus-based approach to examine how Chinese and Western media construct discourse on doping during the Paris Olympics. Two corpora were established: the Paris Olympic Games Chinese Media Reporting Corpus—comprising reports from Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, Global Times, and People's Daily—and the Paris Olympic Games Western Media Reporting Corpus, containing reports from Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Reuters, and selected Canadian and Australian outlets.

Against the background of developments in discourse analysis, it is argued that news should be studied primarily as a form of public discourse [6]. The research employs corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADA) supported by the Sketch Engine platform. Reports were collected from the Factiva database using keywords such as "doping" and "dope", followed by manual screening to remove irrelevant or duplicate content. Guided by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model—textual, discursive, and social level—the analysis explores linguistic and ideological variations between the two corpora. This framework reveals how each media system frames doping and constructs legitimacy.

3 Results and analysis

3.1 Keywords-single-words

Keywords are a key outcome of corpus linguistics that uncover topics, cultural context, linguistic style, and ideology. Keyword analysis thus deepens insight into the corpus's linguistic features and the social phenomena they reflect.

3.1.1 Chinese media corpus single-words

Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model, the analysis and interpretation of the 50 keywords in Figure 1. reveal the issues surrounding the doping problem, as detailed below:

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 anti-doping	14 breaststroke	27 jiyu	40 paris
2 usada	15 sensetime	28 popovici	41 obs
3 wada	16 olympics	29 medley	42 games
4 chinada	17 long-arm	30 ineligibility	43 witold
5 knighton	18 olympic	31 backstroke	44 multi-camera
6 dope	19 erriyon	32 banka	45 provisionally
7 zhanle	20 athlete	33 cover-up	46 ita
8 swimmer	21 rodchenkov	34 metandienone	47 medal
9 trenbolone	22 out-of-competition	35 huaian	48 biles
10 xinhua	23 iflytek	36 medalist	49 alibaba
11 freestyle	24 zhang	37 haiyang	50 performance-enhancing
12 yufei	25 marchand	38 chalmers	
13 ioc	26 qin	39 contamination	

Figure 1. Chinese media corpus single-words

In line with Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse model, the Chinese media corpus reveals four main keyword categories. First, terms such as "WADA", "USADA", "CHINADA", and "IOC" illustrate the hierarchical structure of global sports regulation and the asymmetry of power in establishing legitimacy. References to "CHINADA" show how local institutions use discourse to counter Western norms. Second, technical terms like "anti-doping", "performance-enhancing", and "metandienone" indicate Chinese media's reliance on scientific language to project professionalism and question testing transparency. Third, athlete- and nation-related keywords highlight heroic portrayals of Chinese athletes achieving success amid bias, reinforcing collective pride and moral legitimacy. Finally, cultural metaphors such as "long-arm jurisdiction" and "contamination" represent perceived power expansion and injustice, forming a critical lens on global sports governance. At the discourse and social levels, Chinese media employ these keywords to defend legitimacy and reshape international perception. Mentions of "WADA" and "IOC" affirm global authority, while "CHINADA" repositions

domestic institutions within that system. Outlets like Xinhua merge nationalist and technical narratives to assert athletes' innocence and institutional credibility. Social metaphors such as "long-arm jurisdiction" further critique Western dominance, reframing doping as a contest over discursive power and justice. Overall, Chinese media use linguistic strategy to uphold legitimacy and expose inequality in international sports governance.

3.1.2 Western media corpus single-words

Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model to the keyword list in Figure 2, this section reveals the complex power dynamics and narrative strategies present in global anti-doping discourse.

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 anti-doping	14 rodchenkov	27 medallist	40 cas
2 wada	15 olympics	28 mcdowell	41 marchand
3 chinada	16 ioc	29 olympic	42 zhang
4 usada	17 ogunsemilore	30 decongestant	43 ard
5 dope	18 erriyon	31 echikunwoke	44 contamination
6 swimmer	19 metandienone	32 performance-enhancing	45 cover-up
7 valieva	20 yufei	33 kamila	46 stubblety-cook
8 knighton	21 liv	34 freestyle	47 furosemide
9 ita	22 judoka	35 sprinter	48 out-of-competition
10 trimetazidine	23 zhanle	36 athlete	49 mcintosh
11 trenbolone	24 peaty	37 sehen	50 biles
12 tygart	25 tmz	38 phelps	
13 provisionally	26 faizad	39 bol	

Figure 2. Western media corpus single-words

Four categories of keywords can be analyzed in Figure 2. First, institutional authority is established through repeated references to "WADA", "USADA", and "CHINADA". Western media often present "WADA" and "USADA" as impartial regulators, while portraying "CHINADA" as nationally constrained or less credible—thus sustaining a Western-centered sense of legitimacy. Second, representations of athletes reveal moral hierarchies: "Valieva" is linked to the Russian doping scandal and framed as morally suspect, whereas "Biles" and "Phelps" are depicted as heroic defenders of sporting virtue. Third, technical and legal terms such as "trimetazidine", "trenbolone", and "furosemide" emphasize the scientific veneer of regulation while concealing the bias inherent in its application. Finally, metaphorical expressions like "cover-up" and "contamination" intensify confrontation and foster distrust toward non-Western athletes and institutions.

3.2 Concordance

Frith (1957) famously summarized this principle as "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" [7]. That is to say, concordance analysis helps reveal how specific words reflect discourse strategies and ideological orientations [8]. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this section interprets the keyword "China" in both Chinese and Western media corpora to uncover how each constructs meaning, legitimacy, and power in doping-related narratives.

3.2.1 Concordance on China in the Chinese doping media corpus

Co-occurrence analysis provides insights into how China is embedded within linguistic and ideological structures [9]. Chinese media frequently associate China with excellence, morality, and cooperation, reinforcing a national image of integrity and self-discipline.

At the textual level, Chinese media emphasize China's sporting achievements and positive image through keywords such as "pride", "glory", "confidence", and "zero occurrence of doping". What's more, repetition of collocations—such as "China's Pan breaks world record" and "China supports the U.S. in hosting the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics"—combines both technical prowess and moral language, reinforcing China's technological strengths and sense of international responsibility. In pragmatic practice, China's media leverage three strands of narrative to showcase high strategic intent:

sporting-achievement storytelling, proactive anti-doping discourse, and international-cooperation storytelling. For example, the headline "China Anti-Doping Agency calls for independent investigation" frames anti-doping as a "proactive response" and "collaborative inquiry", thereby re-framing external negative associations that link doping to Chinese athletes. At the socio-cultural level, Chinese media respond to external skepticism over China's doping cases by emphasizing phrases such as "zero occurrence of doping" and "independent investigation". These expressions construct an image of fairness and transparency for international audiences. Meanwhile, in reporting on cooperative expressions like "China supports the U.S. in hosting the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics", the Chinese media highlight China's role as a responsible sporting power and seek to strengthen its voice within the global sports discourse.

In sum, Chinese media construct a self-legitimizing discourse emphasizing innocence, responsibility, and moral leadership. Through institutional and technical rhetoric, they seek to transform China's role from a target of suspicion into a positive shaper of global sports ethics. This strategy exemplifies efforts to assert discursive power, reinforce a positive national image, and promote an inclusive vision of fairness in sports governance.

3.2.2 Concordance on China in the Western doping media corpus

It is believed that discourse is not neutral but an actively constructive medium. Consequently, by examining collocations in Western media reports, one can to a certain extent expose the media's attitudinal positions and the implicit value judgments they convey [10]. In the Western media's repository of doping-related reports, the contextual information associated with the keyword "China" is classified into four primary categories: disputes and allegations, performance and accomplishments, international confrontation, and media and public reactions.

At the textual level, the keyword "China" frequently appears within contexts such as doping controversy, performance outcomes, international competition, and media-public reaction. For example, a headline like "China doping controversy casts a shadow over Olympic swimming" links the doping issue directly to Chinese athletes' results. Such phrasing is typically negative, and the implicit skepticism undermines the purity of China's sporting achievements. In terms of discourse practice, Western outlets accentuate confrontational language to portray an overt clash between China and the United States on the global public-relations stage. Headlines such as "China Anti-Doping Agency calls for probe into US doping allegations" or "China accuses US of using doping to suppress its athletes" frame the doping debate as a symbolic duel between the two powers. Further remarks, such as "China Daily denounces double standards in anti-doping policies", simultaneously reveals internal nationalist sentiment in China while insinuating that Western pundits are skeptical or even hostile to the nation's stance. From a socio-cultural perspective, Western media's emphasis on the doping controversy diminishes the positive image of Chinese athletes, positioning them under heightened scrutiny relative to international sports-ethics standards. This discourse subtly reinforces the moral primacy of Western—particularly U.S.-led—governance in global sports. Moreover, the selective coverage of China's anti-doping initiatives—such as reporting "China Anti-Doping Agency calls for independent investigation"—further erodes perceptions of the country's proactive agency and legitimacy.

In sum, the narratives used by Western media not only shape the international community's perception of China's sporting image, but also reinforce the symbolic import of doping controversies as emblematic of ideological contestation and power play within the realm of global sports governance.

4 Conclusion

Based on a self-compiled corpus and a three-dimensional discourse analysis framework, this paper examines the divergent reporting strategies of Chinese and Western media on doping, analyzed from textual, discourse practice, and social practice perspectives. The findings indicate that media in China and the West adopt markedly different strategies, reflecting divergent ideological positions. Chinese outlets tend to promote positive narratives, portraying a national image

of fair competition and moral legitimacy by emphasizing athletes' innocence and achievements, questioning the fairness of international regulations, and highlighting collective honor, all while seeking greater influence in international discourse. In contrast, Western media often work to undermine the legitimacy of Chinese athletes' successes through negative framing and "performance-controversy" narratives, positioning China's doping cases within a moral framework of suspicion and reinforcing their dominant voice in global sports coverage. This confrontation reflects deeper power inequalities and competing efforts to shape national image in international sports communication, thereby highlighting the ideological tensions inherent in global sports governance [11].

It should be noted that this analysis is based on a specific sample of Chinese and Western media texts, which imposes some limitations on the generalizability of the conclusions. Future research could broaden the focus to other international sporting events, such as the Tokyo Olympic Games, to ascertain whether similar patterns persist.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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