A Study on the Causes of Abnormal Sports Fan Culture and Practical Governance Paths

Ruotong Huang[1,a,*]

[1]*Beijing Sport University, No. 48 Xinxi Road, Haidian District, Beijing, China*

a. jbcfrt@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, abnormal fan culture has gradually infiltrated the sports industry, severely affecting its development. The deviance of sports fan culture not only undermines the dissemination of sportsmanship but also threatens the sustainable development of sports. This paper analyzes the characteristics and connotations of sports fan culture in terms of groups, organizations, and behaviors, exploring the reasons for its deviance. Finally, targeted governance measures are proposed, utilizing a mechanism of multi-agent collaborative governance involving government, online media, society, schools, and families. Through coordinated efforts such as the formulation of corresponding laws and regulations, online regulation, legal education, and positive publicity, it aims to regulate sports fan culture, protect the physical and mental health of athletes, help young people establish correct idol views, and promote the positive development of social sports culture, thus maintaining a healthy sports fan ecology.

Keywords: Sports, Fan culture, Governance measures.

1.   Introduction

"Fan circle" refers to the phenomenon where non-celebrity fan communities engage in activities similar to fan clubs in terms of behavior and logic. Compared to traditional acquaintance societies, fan circles are virtual communities based on online platforms with strong organizational and mobilization capabilities [1]. In recent years, abnormal fan culture has swept through the sports industry. It not only impacts the physical and mental health of athletes, disrupts their normal competition and training, and infringes upon their privacy rights, but also undermines the dissemination of sportsmanship, thereby further affecting the sustainable development of sports.

Studying abnormal sports fan culture holds significant practical significance and social value. Through in-depth research into this phenomenon, it is possible to rectify the disorder in sports fan circles, protect athletes' normal training and competition, promote the positive development of social sports culture, and help young people establish correct views of idols. Additionally, studying the reasons for the deviance of sports fan culture and the practical paths for its governance is of great significance to the development of the sports industry, social harmony, the healthy growth of young people, and the maintenance of public opinion ecology.

2. Characteristics and Connotations of Sports Fan Culture

2.1. Intense Emotional Identification of the Community

"Fan circle" emphasizes interaction and communication among fans through mutual idolization, forming a new virtual community on online platforms with previously fragmented groups. Within this community, there emerges a pursuit of new collective identity, fostered by continuous interactions on the internet, which enhances cohesion.

Each member in the fan circle generates private traffic centered around sports celebrities, disseminating related information within the circle, such as announcing schedules and competition results, or creating derivative works based on existing information, such as fan fiction and supporting posters for athletes. Through information sharing and collaborative creation, members deepen their emotional identification. Simultaneously, the fan circle develops a unique language system, employing specific terms like "ní sù," "qiáng tóu," and "dú wéi," which strengthen bonds among fans while isolating outsiders, creating a closed and exclusive environment. As accumulated content repeats within the circle, under the influence of big data push, an exclusive "information cocoon" emerges, leading to homogenization of viewpoints and intolerance towards dissenting opinions, considered as "betrayal" towards idols [2]. Foreign scholars have shown that in such "information cocoons," "when the majority opinion dominates, minority opinions tend to remain silent" [3], thereby promoting ideological conformity within the circle.

Moreover, fan circles collectively occupy public resources to disseminate internal collective identity viewpoints, using numerous accounts to control public opinion direction. For instance, faced with objective competition results, fan circles might use subjective discourse to favor their own "idols," competing for traffic to maximize their own interests. Having common external enemies intensifies emotional identification among circle members, but this phenomenon of fans clustering can also lead to significant societal impacts, as intense emotional identification, while unifying, can also be highly destructive.

2.2. Institutionalization of Organization

As a typical online community, sports fan circles exhibit institutionalized division of labor, clear leadership-subordination relationships, and distinct hierarchical distinctions based on fans' levels of dedication to their idols [4].

Fan circles categorize into functional departments based on fans' skills and intentions, responsible for managing internal affairs with department heads overseeing daily operations. Driven by interest and passion, fans exhibit high subjective initiative and efficiency in their work, capable of self-sustaining operations without external guidance, and continually attracting outsiders to join.

However, if this institutionalized operating mode isn't used for positive promotion, its potential for destructive consequences increases. Moreover, immersed in the institutionalized organization, fans may find it challenging to detach swiftly and adopt an independent, reflective stance, potentially engaging in behaviors that deviate from social norms, thereby leading societal sports culture astray.

2.3. Irrationality of Behavior

Sports fan circles often exhibit a weak sense of boundaries regarding the exercise of their rights and a vague understanding of privacy rights under the law. They are no longer merely sports enthusiasts; their pursuit is not solely driven by sportsmanship but more by personal idolization of sports celebrities, leading to numerous irrational behaviors.

Fans within these circles are engulfed in the collective identity "camp," driven by shared consciousness towards behavior patterns endorsed by the collective, temporarily overshadowing their

own clear rationality. Consequently, fans are unable to objectively assess the success or failure of competitive sports, comprehend the spirit of athletic endeavor and teamwork, and may reject the fallibility of idealized idols. In a state of collective fervor, they lose their ability to exercise sound judgment, resorting instead to emotional outbursts on media platforms.

3. Reasons for the Deviance of Sports Fan Culture

3.1. Over-exploitation of Athletes' Commercial Value by the Capital Market, Harvesting Fan Economy

Fan economy is a new business operation model aimed at enhancing economic and social benefits by increasing the stickiness between fans and celebrities, gradually becoming a crucial business model in China's entertainment industry [5]. With the development of the new media era, fans' love and attention towards sports stars have spawned a vast fan economy market. The capital market has seized the benefits brought by this business model, commercially packaging sports stars, fully exploiting their commercial value, and transforming them into consumable products. Capital aims to profit by having athletes endorse branded products, participate in reality TV shows, attend commercial events, etc., targeting opportunities for profit extraction. The profit-seeking nature of capital induces fans of these athletes to purchase their derivative products.

Some fans purchase these products not out of genuine personal need but to "boost performance" for their idols, sometimes purchasing quantities far exceeding their daily requirements by hundreds or thousands of times. This behavior not only imposes financial burdens on individuals but also prompts societal reflection on the fan economy. Throughout this process, fans transfer their emotional attachment to their idols onto these products, engaging in emotional labor for their idols. Purchasing these products becomes a way for fans to express support and love for their idols. This form of emotional solace is widely accepted within fan circle culture, even becoming a way to demonstrate loyalty and passion. However, such impulsive and irrational consumption behaviors do not align with mainstream advocacy of rational consumption. Over time, this not only affects fans' own economic conditions but may also distort the entire societal consumption environment.

3.2. Malicious Traffic Diversion by Online Media Leads to Athletes Facing Cyberbullying

With the development of online media, the way sports events are reported has undergone significant changes. Everyone can now voice their opinions, and the threshold for publishing news has lowered. The professionalism of the media is difficult to verify, and high traffic means high exposure. Unscrupulous media outlets take advantage of fans' attention towards idols to harvest traffic. Some online self-media not only focus on the matches themselves but also prioritize creating sensational topics that attract attention, often reporting false news and even resorting to malicious defamation and fabricating fake news to gain followers' attention.

Due to the competitive and unpredictable nature of sports events, athletes' performances often become the focal point of discussion. Some self-media platforms, in order to attract more traffic, frequently manufacture conflicts and controversies to stimulate oppositional emotions among fans. This approach not only imposes significant psychological pressure on athletes but also triggers widespread cyberbullying and malicious attacks within fan communities. However, media platforms lack effective mediation capabilities to resolve conflicts. When conflicts within fan circles escalate into discourse battles and competitions for public attention, media platforms often resort to technical measures such as "traffic restrictions" and "screening," temporarily suppressing conflicts but failing to address the fundamental issues. The infighting among fans not only disrupts the harmony of the online environment but also creates a negative impact on the overall societal atmosphere. In such scenarios, athletes become direct victims of cyberbullying.

3.3. Irrational Behavior of Fan Groups Infringing on Athletes' Privacy Rights

The phenomenon of infantilization among fan circles has long been prevalent, especially among adolescent groups, where it is particularly pronounced. Erikson proposed the theory of eight stages of personality development, noting that individuals in their adolescence are in a period of identity confusion and role confusion. During this stage, fanatical thoughts have not yet fully matured, and concepts of right and wrong are blurred. In a state of collective fanaticism, they are easily incited by fan circles, leading to a distortion of values [6].

Simultaneously, due to the "information cocoon" and unique language systems within fan circles, external interventions have minimal impact on fan groups. These groups also struggle to break through information barriers to absorb positive values from outside, thus generating an "echo chamber effect." In a closed system, information and ideas are reinforced or amplified through repeated dissemination, often leading to the negation or suppression of competing information or ideas. Ultimately, this contributes to societal alienation and irrational behaviors that defy social norms [7]. In this context, the irrational behaviors of fans severely impact athletes' normal lives and training routines. Some fans, in pursuit of their idols, are willing to sacrifice their studies and jobs, frequently tracking their idols' schedules, and even resorting to exposing athletes' private information to gain attention, or intruding into athletes' private living spaces.

Some fans argue that their actions, which they perceive as invading privacy, are merely accessing public information. They believe athletes, as public figures, fall under the "public figure theory," suggesting that personal information is subject to public discussion and dissemination in the public domain, with personal privacy and other personality rights restricted by public interest. Personal private spaces should therefore be compressed [8]. However, athletes are involuntary "passive" public figures due to their professional exposure in the public domain, which cannot justify fans' unrestricted invasion of their privacy. Additionally, athletes' privacy rights cover a broader scope than traditional privacy rights or natural person privacy rights, encompassing not only intimate personal information but also all information reflecting the characteristics of sports affairs [9]. Leakage of such information can impact national sports development and potentially harm national interests to a certain extent.

4. Practices in Governing Dysfunctional Sports Fan Culture

4.1. Government Regulation of Market Misconduct

When the blind nature of fan economics exposes itself and capital exploits asymmetric information to create selling points, resulting in market failures, it becomes necessary for the government to intervene, rectifying fan circle anomalies with reasonable top-down structures.

Firstly, the government should adhere to legal principles, refine relevant laws and regulations governing online communities, and while guiding fan circles appropriately, grant them the statutory freedoms they are entitled to. There should be further enhancement of supervision mechanisms for market access, competition, and reviews in the sports sector, alongside improving complaint reporting mechanisms. "Precision drip irrigation"-style regulation should be applied to the gray areas within fan economics. Severe prohibitions should be imposed on illegal acts such as fans abusing, defaming athletes, or infringing upon their reputation and privacy rights, with accountability pursued for infringements. Secondly, the government can collaborate with diverse stakeholders to jointly govern, cultivating a clear online cultural space. Leveraging the strength of sports associations, schools, the Communist Youth League, social groups, and online media for multidimensional oversight can enhance fan circle's self-regulation and inspection capabilities. This comprehensive approach improves the governance capacity of online communities, fostering a state of multi-stakeholder governance, co-construction, and shared benefits [10]. Lastly, the government should establish

specialized governance teams to uniformly rectify severe misconduct within sports fan circles. Delving deep into the internal workings of fan circles, gaining a thorough understanding of their operational mechanisms, and conducting on-site inspections to identify and address unreasonable behaviors, are crucial steps in formulating and enacting corresponding policies and regulations.

4.2. Reshaping Professional Standards of Online Media

Faced with the misconduct in fan circles on social media such as defamation and online violence, fundamentally, the weakening of the "gatekeeper" role is to blame. Therefore, it is urgent to create thresholds for filtering and screening information, reshape the professionalism of news reporting, and clean up and optimize media spaces.

Firstly, there should be encouragement for the introduction of artificial intelligence technology to assist in content moderation, thereby enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of moderation. Secondly, there should be the establishment of a human-operated "advanced gatekeeper team" to real-time identify irrational fan behaviors and formulate corresponding punitive measures. Confronted with extreme and harmful behaviors within sports fan circles, media outlets should also set up negative examples, actively exposing and criticizing such behaviors appropriately, guiding fans to form correct values and behavioral patterns. Lastly, netizens, as "shadow gatekeepers," also possess the right of public opinion oversight, assisting the government in timely reporting within public spaces and actively exposing rumors.

Online media should actively exercise subjective initiative, promoting the positive values of sports, and correctly utilizing the positive effects of sports stars to spread positivity. For instance, they should promote excellent qualities such as teamwork, fair competition, and respect for opponents in competitive sports, rather than focusing solely on match outcomes and athletes' private lives. Regular education and promotional activities on civilized internet use and rational fan behavior can effectively promote the widespread dissemination of sports spirit and the positive development of sports fan culture.

Meanwhile, internet media should also moderately engage in dual-sided reminders and "negative dissemination" guidance. This means, in order to avoid falling into the pitfalls of discourse hegemony, credibility dormancy, and counter-propaganda misconceptions, there is a need to moderately tolerate erroneous value judgments and moral choices. These should be communicated to the public at large, aiming to strengthen the negative impact of mistaken beliefs while forming a robust immunity effect of "negative dissemination" [11]. For instance, when discussing an athlete's mistakes on the field, should we blame athletes who fail to win gold medals? Using a "warning mode" to resonate with netizens and encourage reflection, the focus of the discussion should shift to appreciating the athletes' hard work and thanking them for bringing glory to the country. This approach aims to eliminate misconceptions that focus solely on championships or gold medals, thereby promoting effective preemptive education.

4.3. Strengthening Education and Guidance for Fan Communities

The core of fan communities in fan circles is trending towards younger ages, mostly comprising adolescents whose ideological values are still forming. Strengthening their legal education and guiding them towards correct values, internalizing legal norms into their hearts and externalizing them in their actions, and transforming exemplary athletes in competitive sports into personal motivation for striving, are crucial remedies for eradicating distorted fan circle cultures.

From families, schools, to society at large, the boundaries of education should be expanded. Comprehensive efforts should be made to promote education on internet safety and legal awareness, actively guiding positive values during adolescence. Furthermore, a profound understanding of the

spirit of sports is equally critical, elevating fans' fervor for individual athletes to a love for sports and pride in their country. It is essential to eliminate idolatry of individualism, strengthen education in collectivism. Families should cultivate adolescents' interest and habits in sports from a young age, helping them appreciate the charm of sports and understand the challenges of athletic training. Schools should organize sports competitions, promote the spirit of sports, and engage in sports clubs and activities, teaching adolescents to cooperate in competition and compete in cooperation. Society should vigorously promote the spirit of sports, guiding fan communities to construct a positive ecosystem for fan culture while focusing on sports stars.

5.   Conclusion

This paper focuses on the erosion of sports by distorted fan circle culture. By summarizing the three main characteristics of sports fan circles—strong emotional identification, organizational standardization, and irrational behavior—it analyzes the reasons for the deviance in sports fan circles. These include capital markets exploiting fan economics, malicious guidance from online media, and irrational illegal behaviors of fans. Finally, from the perspectives of government, media, and fans, corresponding governance measures are proposed.

Sports culture is an essential component of a country's soft power, playing a crucial role in enhancing national influence and disseminating national discourse, thereby driving the development of related industries. However, distorted sports fan circle culture not only affects a country's development in competitive sports but also profoundly impacts its national image. With the widening reach of online media, culture permeates globally, subtly influencing perceptions worldwide. Distorted fan circle culture undermines the positive spirits inherent in sports, such as perseverance and teamwork, exposing youth to erroneous cultural influences before they can form proper judgments, thus distorting their values.

With technological empowerment, the online environment becomes increasingly complex. Therefore, relying solely on government macro-regulation is insufficient to regulate the online environment and propagate positive societal cultures. Various societal actors must provide multifaceted support based on their unique characteristics, collaborating to steer societal culture towards the right path.

References

[1]   Jin, F. T. (2024). "Fandomization": Group organization and behavioral logic in the era of mobile internet. Cultural Dimensions, (02), 142-151+159.
[2]   Zhu, Z. X., & Lu, J. (2024). The dilemma and strategies of moral education for adolescents under "fandom culture". Journal of Xinyu College, 29(03), 84-91.
[3]   Chrisw, C., Cramer, K. J., Wagner, M. W., et al. (2017). When we stop talking politics: The maintenance and closure of conversation in contentious times. Journal of Communication, 67(1), 131-157.
[4]   Gao, L. (2024). The dilemma and relief of "Z Generation" legal thinking shaping—Narrative analysis based on the "fandom" ecosystem. Theoretical Navigator, (03), 88-94.
[5]   Yu, R., & Cheng, W. Q. (2024). Overdevelopment of cultural industry "fan economy" and construction of positive values. Decision Making and Information, (05), 68-75.
[6]   Ni, R. J., & Yu, Y. (2022). Re-examination and guidance of "fandom" phenomenon in sports stars under new media environment—Based on the network ethnography of Yuzuru Hanyu's QQ fan group. In China Sports Science Society (Ed.), Proceedings of the 8th China Sports Doctoral Forum (Written Communication). [Publisher not available], 2. DOI:10.26914/c.cnkihy.2022.069993.
[7]   Wang, W. Y. (2020). How network circles empower youth. People's Forum, 2020(26), 120-121.
[8]   Kenneth, E. H., & Herman, T. T. (2009). The Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
[9]   Wang, M. (2022). Dilemma and innovative path of privacy protection for athletes in the digital age. Journal of Sports Studies, 29(03), 83-88. DOI:10.16237/j.cnki.cn44-1404/g8.20220403.001.

[10] Jiang, L., & Qiang, L. T. (2021). New phenomena of adolescent internet subculture and their group mentality. *Contemporary Youth Research*, (02), 46-51+71.

[11] Wang, S. D. (2023). Research on media guidance of conceptual public opinion. *Sound and Screen World*, (08), 21-24.