

Research on the Construction Mechanism of College Student Sports Fans' Identity in the Age of Social Media

Yiming Liu

Tianping College of Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, Jiangsu 215009, China

Abstract: The in-depth penetration of social media has reshaped the interaction patterns and identity expression paths of sports fans. Taking college student sports fans as the research object, this study explores the construction mechanism of their identity in the social media environment based on Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, combined with digital ethnography and case study methods. The research finds that college student sports fans achieve identity construction through four dimensions: information acquisition and interactive practice, symbolic consumption and identity performance, community belonging and group polarization, and content production and participatory culture. Their identity construction is cross-influenced by platform technical characteristics, campus sports culture, and cross-cultural contexts. This study provides a new perspective for understanding the digital identity of youth groups and offers references for the construction of college sports culture and the operation of social media platforms.

Keywords: Social Media; College Student Sports Fans; Identity; Construction Mechanism; Social Identity

1 Introduction

Sports fan identity is a dynamic process in which individuals internalize their sports interests into self-concept (Tajfel, 1978)^[1]. With the in-depth development of Web 2.0 technology, platforms such as Weibo Super Topics, Douyin fan groups, and Hupu Community have become core arenas for sports fans to acquire information and engage in interactive communication. As typical representatives of youth groups, college student sports fans exhibit digital and communal characteristics in their identity construction. Deloitte (2023), in its 2023 Sports Fan Insights Report, indicates that 90% of Generation Z sports fans watch sports content through social media, and 58% of young people prefer watching games at home with family and friends over attending live events^[2]. However, existing studies have mostly focused on professional sports fan groups, with insufficient exploration into the identity construction mechanisms of the specific group of college students. This paper takes college student sports fans as the research object, based on Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, and combines digital ethnography with case study methods to explore the construction mechanism of their identity in the social media environment.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals form a sense of group belonging through social categorization, group identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)^[3]. In the context of social media, this process has been endowed with new connotations: the anonymity and immediacy of virtual communities have lowered the threshold for group entry, while algorithmic recommendations have reinforced the “information echo chamber” effect. The Uses and Gratifications Theory further suggests that users actively select media content to satisfy cognitive, social, and self-identity needs (Katz et al., 1974)^[4]. For instance, college students acquire event information through Weibo Super Topics (cognitive needs), participate in topic discussions in Douyin fan groups (social needs), and achieve identity expression by posting “support posts” (self-identity needs).

Existing studies have presented three main directions: first, at the technical level, exploring the impact of technologies such as live streaming and VR on viewing experiences (Deloitte, 2023); second, at the group level, analyzing the interaction rules and conflict mediation of fan communities (Wan, 2023)^[5]; third, at the cultural level, focusing on the negotiation between sports fan subculture and mainstream culture (Wei, 2024)^[6]. However, systematic mechanism research targeting college student groups remains relatively scarce, particularly lacking exploration into the “online-offline” identity linkage process.

3 Research Methods

This study adopts a mixed research method: Firstly, digital ethnography. The “Hupu Warriors Section”, “Weibo Curry Super Topic”, and “Douyin CBA Official Fan Group” were selected as observation fields. Participatory observation was conducted on over 3,000 posts and 120 real-time interactions during the 2023-2024 season to record users’ identity expression behaviors. Secondly, in-depth interviews. Twenty college student sports fans (10 males and 10 females, with an average age of 21.3 years) were selected for semi-structured interviews, covering sports disciplines such as football, basketball, and e-sports, with a duration of 60-90 minutes per person, generating approximately 80,000 words of transcribed texts. Thirdly, case study method. Typical cases, including the “Curry fan community” and “identity negotiation of third-culture athletes”, were analyzed to examine the specific pathways of identity construction.

4 Construction Mechanism of College Student Sports Fans’ Identity

4.1 Information Acquisition and Interactive Practice: Foundation of Identity Cognition

Social media provides college student sports fans with efficient channels for information aggregation. Short-video platforms have become the primary avenue for Generation Z to access game highlights, with viewing behaviors of relevant content often concentrated in the short period before events start. This “fragmented” information consumption model promotes the immediate construction of identity cognition: when college students encounter “Messi’s goal highlights” on Douyin and participate in comments, their cognition of the “Barcelona fan” identity is reinforced through interactive behaviors such as likes and reposts.

Interactive practice further deepens identity. In the “Curry Super Topic”, users participate in discussions through topics like “#Curry-Three-PointKing#”, with a large amount of original content produced daily, among which technical analysis content accounts for a significant proportion. This “professional knowledge display” not only satisfies the need for self-actualization but also consolidates the “core fan” identity through community recognition.

4.2 Symbolic Consumption and Identity Performance: Extension from Online to Offline

Symbolic consumption constitutes the core means of identity expression for college student sports fans. At the online level, they construct virtual identity markers through avatar customization (e.g., adopting team logos) and exclusive linguistic codes (e.g., the slogan “Lakers Championship”); at the offline level, they accomplish identity performance via physical consumption behaviors such as purchasing jerseys and collecting star cards. Behind such consumption patterns lies the pervasive influence of social media on the consumption decision-making processes of youth groups. Many college students’ purchasing choices are frequently shaped by the “grassroots recommendation” effect of sports-related content on platforms—whether through the dissemination of exciting match highlights, the sharing of athletes’ daily updates, or consumption recommendations within communities—all of which subtly mold their consumption preferences and carriers of identity expression.

Notably, symbolic consumption exhibits a “differentiation” characteristic. For instance, football fans tend to purchase authentic jerseys to manifest their “die-hard” identity, whereas e-sports fans achieve identity distinction through virtual items (e.g., team skins in League of Legends). This disparity reflects the shaping impact of the cultural attributes inherent in different sports on identity expression (Zhang, Luo & Li, 2012)^[7].

4.3 Community Belonging and Group Polarization: Strengthening of Identity Boundaries

Social media communities provide a fertile ground for cultivating a sense of “we” among college student sports fans. Through the psychological process of group identification, they gradually form clear group boundaries: in “CBA fan groups,” members strengthen in-group identity through differentiated expressions from other groups. This phenomenon is particularly prominent during key event nodes (e.g., play-offs), with some interviewees indicating that they have had conflicts with members of other communities due to “team wins or losses.”

The group polarization effect further exacerbates identity solidification. Algorithm recommendation mechanisms lead to an “information echo chamber,” causing college student sports fans to be exposed to homogeneous viewpoints over an extended period, gradually forming a

“black-and-white” cognitive model. For instance, in discussions related to “the national football team’s losses,” content expressing extreme emotions often garners more attention and interaction than rational analysis, reflecting the double-edged sword effect of community interaction on identity.

4.4 Content Production and Participatory Culture: A New Path to Identity Empowerment

As “digital natives,” college student sports fans are no longer satisfied with passively receiving information but actively engage in content production. They transition from “consumers” to “prosumers” by editing game highlight videos (e.g., Bilibili’s “NBA Top 10 Plays Montage”), creating athlete fan works (e.g., Douyin’s “Messi Anime Images”), and initiating topic challenges (e.g., Weibo’s “#MySportsDNA#”). This user-driven content production model not only reshapes the communication ecology of sports information but also endows non-official creative content with widespread dissemination influence among youth groups, emerging as a crucial carrier for sports fans’ identity expression and cultural practice.

Such content production behaviors not only strengthen self-identity but also promote the youth-oriented dissemination of sports culture. For instance, e-sports fans integrate the King of Glory Professional League (KPL) with campus life through “secondary creation,” producing “dormitory gaming vlogs” that transform e-sports from “niche entertainment” into “group social currency.”

5 Influencing Factors and Difference Analysis

5.1 Shaping Role of Platform Technical Characteristics

The functional design of different social media platforms influences identity construction pathways. Weibo’s “Super Topic” and “trending search” mechanisms are suitable for topic ignition and public discussion, thus becoming the main hub for popular sports such as football and basketball; Douyin’s short-video and live-streaming functions are more conducive to the dissemination of sports with strong visual impact, such as e-sports and extreme sports. For instance, Formula 1 has attracted a large number of college student fans through behind-the-scenes content on Douyin, with related topics generating widespread dissemination effects among youth groups.

5.2 Synergistic Effect of Campus Sports Culture

There exists a “bidirectional empowerment” between campus sports activities and social media identity. On one hand, victories in university team events stimulate college students to post “alma mater pride”-type content on WeChat Moments and QQ Space, strengthening their dual identity as “alumni-fans”; on the other hand, online identity identification also promotes offline participation, with some college students indicating that they have participated in university sports meet volunteer work due to community calls. This linkage is particularly prominent in “sports powerhouse universities”—for instance, students from Tsinghua University have achieved a “campus star-fan community” identity closed-loop through the operation of the “Tsinghua Men’s Basketball” Douyin account (Ding, 2025)^[8].

5.3 Identity Negotiation in Cross-Cultural Contexts

The popularity of international events has led some college students to face the dilemma of “dual identity.” For instance, the emergence of “third-culture athletes” such as Gu Ailing and Harimoto Tomokazu has sparked discussions among Chinese college student sports fans regarding “national loyalty” and “personal preference.” Relevant studies have observed that college students engage in identity negotiation through two strategies: “achievement attribution” (e.g., “Gu Ailing won the championship for China”) and “cultural dissociation” (e.g., “Harimoto Tomokazu’s skills are unrelated to nationality”), reflecting the complexity of sports fans’ identity in the era of globalization.

6 Conclusion and Outlook

This study reveals the four-dimensional construction mechanism of college students’ sports fan identity in the social media era: information acquisition and interactive practice serve as the foundation, symbolic consumption and identity performance act as the carrier, community belonging and group polarization function as the driving force, and content production and participatory culture represent the new pathway. This process is comprehensively influenced by platform technology, campus culture, and cross-cultural factors, exhibiting the characteristics of “online virtual construction-offline physical performance-group dynamic negotiation.”

The limitation of this study lies in the limited sample coverage. In the future, the research scope can be expanded to college student groups from different regions and sports disciplines, and longitudinal tracking methods can be employed to explore the stability of identity. Furthermore, the “gendered identity construction” of female sports fans (e.g., breaking the stereotype that “women do not understand sports”) and mental health risks caused by “excessive identification” (e.g., emotional breakdown after game losses) also warrant further investigation.

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