

Connection, Presence, and Reinvention: The Flow of Sports Culture in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has become the central arena for the dissemination of modern sports culture, profoundly reshaping the paradigm of sports communication. This paper examines this transformation from a media sociology perspective, examining it through three dimensions: communication mechanisms, subject relationships, and cultural dissemination. The findings show that, in terms of communication mechanisms, fragmented narratives and “second screens” have enabled audiences to transition from passive observation to the role of “producer-consumer”; in terms of subject relationships, the self-disclosure of idols has created “simulated intimate relationships,” but has, under the influence of algorithms, led to the “tribalization” of fan groups and the erosion of public rationality; and in terms of cultural forms, sports consumption has undergone a shift from competitive “use value” to identity-based “symbolic value,” becoming a form of performance of a lifestyle. The author believes that while social media empowers the masses, it also triggers a crisis of the “spectacularization” of sports spirit. We should be cautious of the technological logic’s distortion of sports’ humanistic values.

Keywords

The era of social media; Sports culture; Dissemination and propagation.

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of modern information technology, the way people watch sports events is undergoing a fundamental shift. People are no longer confined to their living rooms, waiting for scheduled broadcasts on televisions. Instead, they are accustomed to watching live events on mobile devices in public spaces such as subways and buses, or browsing highlights and participating in live commentary on platforms like Douyin and Weibo. Social media has replaced traditional media as the core arena for the dissemination of modern sports culture. Compared to traditional media, social media has enabled viewers to transition from passive “spectators” to active “creators” and “transmitters” of sports culture, fundamentally transforming the paradigm of sports communication.

Marshall McLuhan once said, “The medium is the message” [1]. It emphasizes the shaping role that the media itself plays in human actions and social patterns. The involvement of social media not only adds an additional distribution channel but also creates a completely new communication environment. In this “always-online” digital square, sports are no longer just objects of observation; the resulting sports culture and spirit have transformed into fluid symbols. We are not just watching games; we are deeply involved in the construction and dissemination of sports culture through interactive behaviors such as likes, comments, and shares on social media.

2. Reconstruction of the Dissemination Mechanism: Fragments, Collages, And Producers/Consumers

In the era of traditional mass media, sports communication exhibited distinct characteristics of centralization, where audiences shared a single authoritative narrative within fixed spatial and temporal coordinates. However, mobile internet technology has disrupted this linear constraint, and viewers have become accustomed to the multitasking capabilities offered by “second screens” – scrolling through Weibo, sending comments, and checking data while watching a game. As Giglietto (2014) notes, this has become a normalized media landscape [2].

The involvement of the logic of short-video platforms has further pushed sports communication to the extreme of “fragmentation” and “collage.” The complete competitive process is deconstructed into highlight moments, compilation of errors, and mixed clips of side stories. This fragmented content format greatly lowers the threshold for viewing, enabling sports content to spread beyond its original boundaries. However, it also disconnects the content from its original context. At this point, the audience is no longer a passive recipient but rather a “producer-consumer,” as described by Tufte [3]. Whether it’s Cristiano Ronaldo’s muscles, Quan Hongchuan’s dolls, or the fashion choices of sports stars, all have become symbols that are consumed and reproduced. This confirms Guy Debord’s prediction in “The Society of the Spectacle”: sports are evolving into a spectacle of visual consumption, where sensory stimulation often takes precedence over the depth of competition.

The initiative of fan groups has been unleashed in unprecedented ways within this system. They no longer remain mere silent observers; instead, they have transformed into empowered content creators and agenda-setters. Through tactics like retrospective analysis, creation of memes, and other forms of “secondary creation,” fan groups have not only reconstructed the network of meanings within sports texts but have also collaborated with sports stars and media institutions to build a decentralized, highly dynamic symbiotic communication ecosystem.

3. Re-shaping of the Primary Relationship: The Demystified Idol and the Tribalized Fan

The most fundamental change in social media is the reconfiguration of the underlying logic of interpersonal connections. In the traditional era of mass media, sports stars were often portrayed as flawless yet distant heroes. Today, athletes use platforms such as Weibo, Instagram, Tiktok, or Twitter to show the public their daily lives outside of training: food, pets, and even setbacks and anxiety. This shift from the “backstage” to the “frontstage” has provided new evidence for Goffman’s theory in the digital age. Through this form of self-disclosure, athletes have established a close “simulacrum of intimacy” with their fans. The idol in the eyes of fans is no longer a cold gold medal machine but a living, breathing ordinary person.

However, this sense of closeness is also a double-edged sword. It has led to the rapid fragmentation of fan groups based on emotions, creating distinct “tribes,” and the “fan culture” has subsequently infiltrated the sports world. As scholars such as Zhang Xinmiao have noted, the “fan culture” of sports is a complex symbiotic entity that is rooted in media, centered on emotions, and supported by organizations [4]. Under the algorithmic recommendation system, big data brings together users with similar preferences. Sports enthusiasts have formed close-knit emotional communities within specific supergroups and hashtags, which fosters a deep sense of belonging. However, they also receive one-sided information due to the “information cocoon,” leading to “tribalization” and exclusivity.

The crux of the issue lies in the alienation of the content being disseminated. The focus of online sports reporting has gradually shifted, from objective analysis of athletic achievements to the entertainment-oriented exploration of private content outside the arena. This shift has

reshaped the logic of fan engagement: from focusing on an athlete's competitive prowess to becoming enamored with their constructed "persona," and from rational sports enthusiasts to emotionally driven "superfans" [5]. This not only serves as the emotional driving force behind fan support activities within the "fan culture" community, but it also poses a profound concern: when the urge to uphold an idol's image takes precedence over respect for the sport itself, the public rationality upon which sports culture relies is facing a severe challenge.

4. The Spread and Generalization of Culture: Redefining Lifestyles

With the aid of algorithmic recommendation technology, the boundaries of sports culture are rapidly eroding. Discs, skateboarding, rock climbing, and other previously niche sports or subcultures that were once on the fringes have, thanks to the visual representation on social media, quickly broken through their niche status and become a trendy lifestyle for urban youth. Take ultimate frisbee, for example. This emerging sport has become one of the most popular activities among young people due to its strong social aspects and low entry barriers, and has led to the formation of new tribes that cater to their spiritual needs and living requirements [6]. In the process, sports consumption has undergone a profound shift from "use value" to "symbolic value." When viewed through the lens of Baudrillard's "consumer society," the fitness check-ins on WeChat Moments, exquisite camping experiences, or photos wearing retro jerseys (Bloke Core) have evolved into a form of identity performance. Sports have been stripped of its raw, gritty essence of sweat and struggle, refined through filters and symbol reconstruction, transforming into a form of "social currency" that endorses self-discipline, fashion, and middle-class tastes. At this point, the core logic of the spread of sports culture is no longer Olympic-style "higher, faster, stronger," but rather "more beautiful, more trendy, more relaxed" within the context of consumerism. The body has become a gazed-upon spectacle, and sport itself has been transformed into a consumable symbol.

As the wave of pan-entertainment continues to advance, sports are no longer isolated social subsystems but are gradually evolving into a fluid "medium of life." We see sports stars appearing at fashion weeks, esports events incorporating concert-level stage design, and variety shows using entertainment logic to deconstruct sports rules. This trend of "de-differentiation" has endowed sports culture with tremendous permeability – it is embedded in music festivals, campsites, and even cafes, becoming a cultural fluid. Against the backdrop of the increasing "internal competition" and anxiety in modern society, this generalized and relaxed sports culture provides urban dwellers with a psychological compensation and spiritual outlet.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the involvement of social media is more than just a change in communication channels. It fundamentally reconstructs the temporal and spatial structure of sports communication, the relationships between subjects, and the cultural logic. From a communication mechanism perspective, linear grand narratives have been replaced by fragmented micro-collages, and audiences have gained unprecedented linguistic empowerment through their transition from "producers" to "consumers". In terms of subject relationships, decentralized connections have shattered the enigmatic aura of idols, but have also, under the influence of algorithms, fostered exclusive "tribal" fan cultures. Culturally, sports have undergone a transformation from "competitive utility" to "symbolic consumption," becoming a dynamic medium through which modern individuals can resist internal competition and showcase their lifestyles.

However, as we immerse ourselves in this "visual feast" woven from technology and symbols, we must maintain a cautious and critical mindset. Just as Guy Debord warned about the risks of

“landscapes,” when sports are reduced to mere piles of consumed imagery, and when the performance of “more beautiful, more trendy” symbols overshadows the essence of “higher, faster, stronger” competition, the core values of transcendence and fairness within sports are at risk of being eroded. While the wave of pervasive entertainment has greatly expanded the audience base for sports, it also risks leading sports culture toward “hollowing out” in the face of excessive vulgarity and commercialization.

Therefore, in the digital square dominated by algorithms, while acknowledging the participatory democracy and cultural diversity brought about by social media, we must also be vigilant about the dehumanization of technological logic on humanistic spirit. Future sports communication should strive to find a balance between embracing popularity and upholding authenticity. Only when audiences return from their obsession with “persona” to respect “people,” and from consuming “symbols” to experiencing “sports” itself, can the sports culture of the social media era avoid becoming a mere entertainment carnival and instead regain its public value of fostering social consensus and inspiring human spirit.

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