

Analysis of Irrational Behaviors in Sports "Fan Culture" from a Psychological Perspective

Xiao Hu

School of Physical Education, Southwest University, Beibei District, Chongqing 400715, China

Abstract

Irrational behavior in the sports "fan culture" during the 2024 Paris Olympics has drawn attention, such as fans attacking other athletes and leaking personal information. These actions not only undermine the Internet ecosystem, but also cause social conflicts. This article analyzes the phenomenon from a psychological perspective and has significant theoretical and practical implications. The irrational behaviors in the "fan culture" of sports are diverse, including excessive consumption due to blind pursuit, distorted values, offline stalking and blocking affecting athletes' lives, and cyber violence damaging athletes' rights and interests. The causes involve a variety of psychological mechanisms. The halo effect makes fans ignore the negative aspects of athletes. The herd mentality makes fans be affected by group pressure. The projection mentality makes fans place their emotions in athletes. Personality traits such as high neuroticism and low agreeableness can also trigger irrational behavior. To guide the rational development of the sports "fan circle", it is necessary to strengthen departmental supervision, improve systems, enhance organizational education and promote a healthy culture. At the same time, fans should exercise self-restraint and practice rational star-chasing. Only in this way can a green and healthy star-chasing environment be created to support the development of sports.

Keywords

Psychological perspective; Fan circle culture; Irrational behavior.

1. Introduction

During the 2024 Paris Olympics, China's outstanding athletes demonstrated a good mental outlook and excellent athletic skills in various events. The athletes' excellent performance not only helped enhance China's international image, but also inspired the national pride of the people. However, with the development of the "fan culture" in the sports field, some extremely fanatical fans, in groups, attack other outstanding athletes on social media platforms to defend their idols, and even verbally or physically attack athletes at the competition site; It throws the athletes of both sides into the maelstrom of public opinion and puts them under great psychological pressure. The so-called "fan circle" mainly refers to "communities formed in pursuit of idols", while "fan culture" is a subculture[1] derived from the values, behavioral characteristics, etc. of its members.

On January 14, 2025, the General Administration of Sport of China held a special meeting on ideological work in the system and the governance of "fan circle" chaos, stating that "we should focus on the key points of the struggle, take the governance of 'fan circle' chaos as an urgent task at present, strengthen team management, publicity and guidance, strengthen risk prevention and control, and focus on key groups." [2].

In recent years, the rapid development of self-media platforms has provided a platform for the rapid growth of sports "fan culture", and its influence has been growing. The extreme enthusiasts in this group have shown irrational behaviors such as blind worship, attacks and

defamation of athletes, which not only have a bad impact on the Internet ecosystem, but also trigger many social contradictions and conflicts. "Irrational behavior" refers to behavioral patterns that are driven by emotions as the core force, causing an individual's behavior to deviate from rational decision-making. This article analyzes the irrational behavior of groups in sports "fan culture" from a psychological perspective, enriches research in the intersection of sports sociology and psychology, provides a new perspective for understanding the psychology and behavior of fan groups in sports contexts, and improves the relevant theoretical system. It provides a reference for sports-related departments to support the normal development of sports culture and create a healthy environment for sports culture.

2. Irrational behavior in sports' fan culture '

With the vigorous development of China's sports industry, fanatical behaviors of fans in the sports "fan culture" have also emerged one after another. For instance, during the women's singles table tennis final at the Paris Olympics, fans of Sun Yingsha and Chen Meng attacked and abused the athletes on social media and even at the competition site; The personal information of table tennis player Fan Zhendong was even obtained and leaked by extreme fans through illegal means.

2.1. Blind Pursuit: A blend of fanaticism and infatuation without understanding

With more social media promotion of athletes, more and more athletes' excellent performances on the field have become known to the public, and many spectators have turned from "roads" to "fans". Thanks to the convenient consumption channels provided by e-commerce platforms and the development of products by major brands, a large number of sports-related products have flooded into the consumer market. Fans buy a lot of merchandise to show their support for their idols, thus creating a "fan culture" characterized by consumption. This phenomenon of excessive consumption resulting from blind pursuit adds utilitarian and impetuous elements to the "fan culture", often leading to a bad trend in the entire group and thus affecting the healthy development of the "fan culture".

Fans' feelings towards their idols are unprincipled[3], and this unprincipled nature is often manifested in the distortion of values caused by their worship. Some fans lose their rational judgment when negative news about athletes is exposed, and even attack the facts with words or actions in order to maintain the positive image of the athletes. This not only pollutes the good Internet environment, but also brings violent and out-of-control elements to the "fan culture". Due to the extreme worship of their idols, fans' emotions towards them are overly protective and exclusive[3], and many fans tend to have an overly strong sense of identification in the process of following the athletes' lives and competitions. When athletes perform well, they are overjoyed and make unreasonable celebratory acts; If an athlete performs poorly or is criticized, they get stuck in grief and anger. With more irrational behavior in the "fan culture", fans in the group, feeling the pressure of the group, tend to intensify their behavior in the process of following their stars and become more and more fan[4]atical.

2.2. Extreme behavior: Harassment methods such as offline stalking and encirclement coexist

In the current situation where the "sports fan culture" is developing abnormally, the behaviors of many passionate fans also directly or indirectly affect the normal life and competitions of athletes. With the development of media technology and the idol economy, fan circles have become more and more systematic and have expanded from the entertainment circle to the sports circle. A large number of fan groups do not love athletes because of their excellent athletic skills, but because of their appreciation of their appearance; That is what is called

"good-looking fans". The formation of such fan groups reflects the impact of traditional sports values on entertainment culture, and the wrong value orientation has given rise to a large number of extreme behaviors[4] among fans.

Athletes' travel information is easily exposed on the Internet, and some fans, in order to satisfy their sick curiosity, will crowd the athletes at the airport under the pretext of picking them up and do some fanatical things, which not only affects the normal operation of public transportation places, but also poses a threat to the athletes' normal travel and personal safety. In 2024, a badminton player was brutally surrounded by fans at the airport, which greatly affected his normal travel. There were even fans who would wait outside training venues or rest areas for long periods and use various photography tools to secretly take pictures of the athletes' normal travel and training. Not only does it make it difficult for athletes to concentrate during training, but it also casts a huge psychological shadow on them. In 2023, a table tennis player posted a statement through a social media account claiming that a die-hard fan had followed him for a long time and asked for room cards from the hotel staff to enter his room multiple times while he was out training.

2.3. Cyber violence: In various forms such as malicious editing and verbal attacks

In addition, there are many irrational behaviors of fan groups on social media. Due to the continuous development of Internet technology, athletes' personal information can easily be leaked. Many fans use phone calls to harass athletes, and even personal information of athletes is openly sold on the Internet. In 2024, the phone number of a table tennis player was exposed by an extreme fan, and a large number of haters used text messages and phone calls to abuse the player and his family, seriously infringing upon the player's personal privacy and reputation. On self-media platforms, such behavior is even more common, with a large number of extreme fans harassing the athlete through private messages on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin. There are many uncontrollable factors in competitive sports, and it's normal for the performance to be inconsistent. Many extreme fans lack a correct understanding of competitive sports. If an athlete fails to achieve the desired results, many haters will take the opportunity to launch personal attacks on the athlete, and even stand on the moral high ground to criticize and abuse the loss of the competition.

Cyber violence is not only seen between fans and athletes, but also among different groups of athletes' fans. Extreme fans, under the pretext of "defending their idols," engage in online verbal battles in groups, using all kinds of aggressive language to slander the athletes they support. These irrational behaviors in the "fan culture" have caused damage to the athletes' performance, the good atmosphere of the event, and the cultivation of teenagers' values.

3. An analysis of the causes of irrational behavior from a psychological perspective

Gustave Le Pen presents the manifestations[5] of group psychology in his book "The Crowd: A Study of the Psychology of the Masses." The book mentions that some members of the mass movement devote themselves to so-called eternal feats, and they are convinced of the behavior of the objects of worship. The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that[6] when the degree of distinction between an individual and a group is within a certain range, the individual may gradually shift from not paying attention to identification. When an athlete's performance on the field is in line with the values of the audience, and the individual is under various pressures in daily life and in urgent need of spiritual support, an outstanding athlete is likely to become the perfect image in the minds of fans.

3.1. Halo effect

The halo effect is also known as the aperture effect. When a certain trait of a person is more attractive, people tend to ignore other traits and show a lack of rational bias [7] when evaluating that person. This is because there is an overall bias in the formation of a fan's first impression of an idol, and fans tend to view the idol as a whole rather than as a sum of character, values, etc. Due to the halo effect, during the formation of the first impression, the good traits of the idol are magnified infinitely to the extent that other traits are masked, thus creating an overall impression that lacks rational judgment. In the "sports fan culture", the halo effect refers to the fact that fans have developed an adoration and fondness for an athlete's outstanding performance on the field, and thus tend to lose their rational judgment when evaluating the athlete as an individual. Due to the presence of the halo effect in the formation of the first impression of an athlete, this first impression has a strong stability and may even become more stable over time. Fans' blind support for athletes often leads them to actively ignore the negative factors when evaluating the athletes, even if the athletes' behaviors on and off the field do not conform to the correct values, fans will still maintain their fanatical support for the athletes and even try to counter the facts by distorting them. When it comes to the athletes themselves, the fanatical preference of the fan community often causes them to ignore their own problems and even deviate from the spirit of competitive sports.

3.2. Herd mentality

The development of the "fan circle" has become increasingly mature, showing a high degree of organization and discipline in its activities. When new fans enter the fan circle, driven by group pressure, new fans need to follow these rules, such as cheering for their idols on the charts. If a new fan's behavior deviates from the overall direction of the group, they may be criticized and excluded by other fans. Under such pressure, fans will choose to fit in with the group, integrate into it, and try to gain the group's approval and acceptance [8]. "Fan circles" are classified based on the amount of resources and information they have about their idols, while opinion leaders in fan communities usually have more resources and information. Their words and deeds have a strong guiding effect on ordinary fans. The various information about idols and interpretations of various events posted by "opinion leaders" can easily influence the minds of ordinary fans, and this mentality of authority obedience intensifies the herd behavior [9] of fans. After joining the fan community, fans believe that supporting their idol means supporting their common culture and values. As a result of the effect of self-identity, they connect themselves with the idol and fan community they support. In this case, in order to strengthen their identity, fans actively engage in various activities and behaviors within the fan circle, aligning themselves with the group and showing conformity.

3.3. Projective Psychology

In the "sports fan culture", the behavior and perception of fans can be explained by projection psychology.

3.3.1. The self-dimension of projection psychology

In the self-dimension of projection psychology, fans tend to view athletes as idealized selves or objects of emotional needs. Many fans are unable to achieve their ideal pursuits in real life due to limited conditions. As a result, fans view outstanding athletes as their ideal selves in real life. When athletes achieve excellent results or show brilliant performances on the field, many fans bring their idols' performances into themselves and gain great satisfaction. At the same time, due to emotional needs, athletes become the ideal emotional support object in the eyes of fans. Fans express their support for the athlete through irrational behaviors such as buying a lot of merchandise or almost crazy ranking support [10].

3.3.2. Project the psychological dimension of the group

In the group dimension of projected psychology, the behaviors of the entire "fan circle" usually have unified norms and values. Fans will actively align their behaviors with those of the entire "fan circle" and project their own values onto the "fan circle" group[11]. When a fan is in a "fan circle", the fan subconsciously believes that other members of the "fan circle" share the same values as him, and through activities organized for the idol within the circle, the recognition of these values is continuously enhanced. Many fans have a one-sided understanding of the values and show exclusivity when defending the established values of the fan circle. For example, fans who do not support an athlete by spending a lot of money are considered to be against the values of the fan circle. Such irrational behavior can lead to frequent conflicts within the circle and affect the self-judgment of normal fans in the process of following their stars.

4. Personality Traits

4.1. The Big Five personality Theory

The Big Five personality theory contains five main personality dimensions[12]: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Among them, fans with high neurotic traits lack emotional stability and tend to fall into negative emotions in life; When performing poorly in idol competitions or negative news emerges, they tend to engage in irrational behaviors such as making extreme remarks. Highly extroverted fans are eager for social interaction and to be the center of attention in social groups, so they actively engage in "fan circle" activities to gain group recognition. Fans who are less open tend to form a fixed pattern of the athlete they support and have a low acceptance of new ideas, so they tend to blindly support their idol. Fans with lower conscientiousness lack a sense of responsibility and self-discipline, and thus tend to consume irrationally while chasing their idols. Fans with low affability tend to be self-centered and have difficulty maintaining an objective attitude when evaluating their idols, thus making irrational remarks about other athletes in order to defend their idols.

4.2. The "temperament type" theory

Temperament types include: melancholic, choleric, sanguine and mucinous. Fans of the choleric and sanguine types are emotionally rich, showing as passionate, intense and impulsive. As a result, they often show excessive fanaticism in the process of following their stars and are prone to conflicts with other fans. Fans with mucous and melancholic temperament types tend to have more stable and delicate emotions, but that doesn't mean they won't act irrationally while following their stars. On the contrary, these two types of fans tend to be more stubborn, insist on their own opinions when faced with their idols' wrong behaviors, have difficulty objectively evaluating the facts, and may even engage in irrational behaviors such as self-harm due to excessive empathy.

5. Strategies for guiding the rational development of sports' fan circles

5.1. Strengthen departmental supervision and improve relevant institutional guarantees

The Cyberspace Administration of China is responsible for supervising cyberspace. It is necessary to clean up illegal and non-compliant remarks in a timely manner; Ban the offending accounts; Supervise self-media platforms to lead the right values. Public security authorities crack down on illegal and criminal activities in fan circles in accordance with relevant laws and regulations. For example, penalties are imposed on fans who disrupt public order by following

their stars; Deal with the illegal leakage of athletes' information; Hold accountable for cyber violence.

Relevant authorities should speed up the improvement of laws and regulations in this area, and clarify the criteria and measures for punishing irrational behavior in the "fan circle" that causes serious consequences to society or individuals. Legal provisions should be refined for Internet violence and privacy leaks to enhance the deterrent effect of the law. At the same time, reasonable and legal industry norms should be established to regulate entities such as sports associations, sports clubs and sports self-media accounts on various platforms within the sports industry. It is stipulated that in the process of event promotion, event organization and product release, the event should not be overly entertaining for the purpose of making a profit; It is not allowed to induce fans to engage in excessive consumption or other irrational behavior.

5.2. Strengthen organizational education and promote a healthy fan culture

To strengthen the organization and education of "fan culture", the local sports department should take the lead in grasping the general direction of the education work, and then non-governmental sports organizations, sports clubs and schools should carry out publicity work in light of their specific circumstances. The authorities should open official accounts on various self-media platforms to promote the events, increase the influence of the accounts, and control the direction of public opinion on major news. Adopt a combination of online and offline educational promotion methods to promote the normal development of "sports fan culture". On the one hand, it can help the fan group form the correct values towards sports culture during their school years. On the other hand, the online approach can significantly reduce the cost of education and promotion. In addition, the top fans who spread misleading remarks should be criticized and educated in accordance with the law, and the top fans who post positive sports content should be rewarded with traffic to ensure clear rewards and punishments.

To promote a healthy "sports fan culture". Sports public service advertisements and positive videos can be promoted through multimedia platforms, and in the broadcast and live broadcast of events, hosts and commentators can promote positive sports culture through guiding methods. At major sports events and sports venues, promotional activities can be carried out in the form of banners, activity brochures, broadcasts, etc. It is also possible to establish the image of an athlete or coach as a quality idol, and indirectly promote the positive "sports fan culture" through the love of the fan group for the idol, thereby promoting the healthy development of the "sports fan culture".

5.3. Exercise self-discipline and practice rational star-chasing behavior

Fans should think deeply about their original intention in the process of following a star, whether they are attracted by the athlete's excellent performance on the field and the competitive spirit shown, or whether it is a blind act of following the crowd. If it is because of the former, one should draw strength from the athlete's performance and use it as a means to overcome difficulties in life. If it is because of the latter, it should be adjusted in time to prevent the occurrence of irrational behavior in the process of chasing stars. When evaluating an athlete, a fair and objective analysis should be conducted. Do not try to reverse right and wrong out of love for the athlete. No offensive remarks should be made against other athletes or their fans, and the spread of bad remarks should be avoided.

In order to practice rational fan chasing, fans should establish a self-reflection mechanism in the process of chasing. In the process of supporting athletes, one should constantly reflect on whether one's behavior is rational, and correct irrational behaviors such as excessive consumption and making irrational remarks in a timely manner. Before such situations occur, self-restraint should be exercised to prevent a vicious cycle of irrational behavior. When in the "fan circle", fans need to rationally control their words and deeds within the "fan circle", not

only to maintain their own online image, but also to contribute their share to the healthy development of the "fan circle culture". If you are an "ordinary fan" in the fan circle, you should kindly remind other fans of their irrational behavior; If you are a "top fan", you should lead by example, exert positive influence in the "fan circle", drive the group by yourself and create a healthy and positive "fan circle culture".

6. Conclusion

The "fan culture" has a long history. In recent years, the "sports fan culture" as a new phenomenon in the sports field has not only driven the rapid development of sports culture, but also given rise to many irrational behaviors. From the world-renowned Paris Olympics to public places and social media; From traffic jams caused by airport pick-up to public opinion attacks in cyberspace. Such irrational behavior not only affects the normal life of athletes and their fan groups, but also injects instability into the good social atmosphere.

To understand the irrational behavior of the fan community in the "sports fan culture", this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon using theories related to projection psychology, halo effect, personality traits, and conformity psychology, thereby exploring the complex psychological causes behind these irrational behaviors. In a new perspective, this paper attempts to refine the relevant theoretical system in the intersection of sports sociology and psychology.

To address these issues, it is crucial to adopt strategies such as strengthening departmental oversight, enhancing organizational education, and self-restraint among fans themselves. The management department actively practices supervision and regulation, improves relevant laws and regulations, and punishes bad behavior in accordance with the law; Sports organizations and schools promote positive energy to create a good "sports fan circle" environment; Fans establish self-reflection mechanisms to enhance their sense of self-restraint. Only by working together from top to bottom can we ensure the healthy development of the "sports fan culture" and create a green and healthy star-chasing environment.

With the continuous attention from higher authorities and in-depth research from all sectors of society, more effective governance methods are expected to be explored to ensure the healthy development of the "sports fan culture". With the joint efforts of all parties, the irrational behavior in the "sports fan culture" will surely be controlled as it should be, and the "fan culture" will play a positive role in promoting the development of sports and thus better promote the sports spirit.

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