

## Research on the mainstream transformation and patriotism in the emotional labor of sports star fan community (Postprint)

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### Abstract

In recent years, the state has promulgated a series of policies to promote the transformation and upgrading of the sports entertainment industry, while sports stars who have won glory for the nation have been frequently reported by mainstream media. Against the backdrop of increasing emotional labor, fans' enthusiasm and pride for their country have gradually intensified. Through effective analysis of collected questionnaires, this study reveals that sports stars play a significant role in guiding fans' emotions. Fans' feelings toward these stars readily sublimate into love and pride for their country. The greater the emotional labor invested by fans in sports stars, the more pronounced this emotional sublimation becomes. This demonstrates that the positive image of sports stars not only positively guides the deepening of fans' patriotic sentiments; furthermore, discussion and analysis indicate that such positive images also guide fans to participate in public welfare initiatives and patriotic activities.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the state has issued a series of policies to promote the upgrading of sports industry entertainment, and sports stars who win glory for the country have been frequently reported by mainstream media. The enthusiasm and pride of sports star fans for their country has gradually deepened alongside increasing emotional labor. Through effective analysis of recovered questionnaires, this research found that sports stars play a certain role in guiding fans' emotions. Fans' feelings toward stars easily sublimate into love and

pride for their country. The more emotional labor that sports star fans invest in stars, the more obvious this emotional sublimation becomes. This demonstrates that the positive image of sports stars not only has a positive guiding role in deepening fans' patriotic feelings; additionally, through discussion and analysis, we found that the positive image of sports stars guides fans to participate in public welfare undertakings and patriotic actions.

**Keywords:** empathy theory; fan culture; emotional labor; patriotism

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, with increasing attention to international sports events in China, driven by capital power and public pursuit, it has become common for sports stars to attract cross-domain fans. With the rapid development of the Internet, a platform-based “fan economy” has emerged in Chinese fan culture. Fans perform emotional labor for sports stars and voluntarily become digital workers on Weibo platforms. We have observed that fans' personal love for sports stars can easily translate into national pride and patriotism. This raises the question: does fans' love for sports stars transform into love for the country along with the national honor of the sports stars, and does fans' voluntary labor behavior deepen this emotion? This article attempts to verify the impact of sports stars' emotional labor on fans' patriotic feelings through audience surveys and in-depth interviews, and discusses the positive significance of sports stars' positive image in guiding fans' patriotism.

### 2.1 Overview of Fan Culture and Literature

Domestic fan culture research is primarily based on foreign fan culture theories, developing localized interpretations of domestic fan culture phenomena. Domestic fan culture studies began in the 1990s, when Li Hairong, a mature theoretical researcher on “fan culture,” proposed a hexagonal model examining the difference between idols and role models in the article “Youth Idol Worship and Example Learning” based on investigation and research. The second stage of research focused on exploring the group behavior of “fans,” with the overall research direction divided into three categories: fans' consumption, fans' psychology, and fans' interactive behavior. With the development of the times, fans, as both information consumers and content producers, have become an important component of fan culture research under the background of the Internet era. In the third stage, due to the rise of microblog platforms, the fan economy has changed the power distribution structure of the entertainment industry. The fan economy represents the realization of fans' power, and fans no longer simply depend on stars. As digital workers for stars on the microblog platform, stars and fans are no longer engaged in a one-way emotional connection, but rather deepen two-way emotional construction.

In recent years, domestic research has mainly focused on the emotional relationship between fans and idols, fan creation, changes in fan organizations, and other

aspects. However, due to the complexity of fan culture and new changes brought about by Internet technology, research in this area needs to be strengthened.

The study of foreign fan culture can be roughly divided into three periods. From the end of the 1970s, some scholars noted that fan culture had become a special form of mass culture. Michelle Desai analyzed people's consumption behavior in his works, arguing that consumers use the symbolic characteristics of goods to construct personal discourse, while fans re-create media texts multiple times through the consumption of culture and idol images, affirming fans' enthusiasm and creativity. Pierre Bourdieu analyzed the French class structure, discussed consumption patterns of different classes, linked fan culture with real society, and greatly enriched research results. The third stage of fan culture research revolves around the rapid development of the Internet, refining more research perspectives. In his research, Grosberg pointed out that one of the most important aspects of fan culture is emotion. In the social environment of consumption, the generation and consumption of fan culture originate from people's emotional investment. With the development of digital technology, the emotional economy displayed in fandom has enthusiasm, and the consumption mode also shows collectivity. Foreign fan culture research shows a trend of refining the research path with the changes of the times, but there are still some research gaps.

## 2.2 Review of Empathy Theory

The theory of empathy was first used in the study of aesthetic psychology, referring to the mutual transfer and projection of emotions between human subjects and objects. The German psychologist Theodore Lipps used "emotional migration" to study how people understand the psychological state of others, extending the study of empathy to interpersonal communication. Since then, the concept of empathy has been widely applied. In the field of social psychology, BASENT in 1991 put forward the "empathy-altruism hypothesis," proposing that individual helping behavior follows two different paths: one path is similar to human empathy motivation, while another is based on personal self-motivation arising from sadness. At the same time, Homan and BASENT's "empathy-altruism hypothesis" also confirmed the information function of empathy, providing a new research perspective for the academic community.

With the deepening of empathy theory research, its concept has been widely applied in various fields. Foreign research achievements on empathy theory are relatively rich, while domestic research has only started in recent years, and empathy theory is basically not used to explain the emotional driving effect of stars on fans. Therefore, this paper will start from empathy theory to analyze how sports stars influence fans' patriotic feelings through discussion and identification.

### 3 Study Hypotheses and Study Methods

This paper employs audience surveys and interview methods to explore the influence of sports star fans' emotional labor input on fans' patriotic feelings.

#### 3.1 Study Hypotheses

H1: The more emotional work fans pay to sports stars, the stronger their patriotic feelings will become.

H2: The more emotional work fans pay to sports stars, the stronger their willingness to pay patriotic emotional labor.

#### 3.2 Study Methods

This study adopts in-depth interviews to understand the specific situation of emotional investment, followed by a questionnaire survey.

##### 3.2.1 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted one-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 fans of sports stars. The interviews began in December 2022 and ended in March 2023. Interviewees were selected from fans of recently popular sports stars, such as those of Wu Dajing. The sample included senior fans known to the author, with additional research samples collected through internal staff of fan groups. According to the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research methods, the total interview content from the fifth respondent was sufficient to answer the research questions, and sample collection was closed. The respondents varied in age, occupation, education level, and star-chasing experience, showing low homogeneity. However, due to the younger age structure of sports star fans themselves, the interviewees were mainly students. Interviews were conducted via telephone, Weibo private chat, and one-to-one face-to-face interviews. The interview results were collated into verbatim manuscripts.

#### 3.3 Audience Survey Method

The questionnaire survey used a five-point Likert scale to measure sports star fans' emotional investment and the degree of change in patriotic emotion as emotional labor input increased. Scale statements were summed and averaged to generate corresponding variables "star mainstream" and "fans' patriotic emotion and national pride" for subsequent data analysis.

##### 3.3.1 Sample Selection

Through analysis of the age, field, fan group, commercialization degree, and activity of sports stars in mainstream media, the corresponding group was determined to be fan groups of sports stars from recent years. Non-representative

sampling and judgment sampling were conducted for this group to ensure sampling effectiveness. With the help of the Questionnaire Star platform, this research input, created, and distributed questionnaires. Questionnaire links were distributed through WeChat, Weibo Super Topics, Baidu Tieba, QQ Space, Zhihu, and the Questionnaire Star filling community. The questionnaire was distributed from March 20 to March 27. The questionnaire was filled out by people of different ages, education levels, regions, and incomes to ensure diversity and reliability of respondents. However, due to the limited number of people available to the author and the relatively young age composition of the star-chasing group, most respondents in this survey were college students.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion (Study Method and Variable Design)

In this study, 299 questionnaires were distributed, and 277 valid questionnaires were collected after eliminating 22 invalid questionnaires. Among them, 208 were from women and 69 from men. In terms of sample characteristics, the samples collected in this questionnaire survey were mainly school students aged 18-25 or above who are sports star fans.

##### 4.1 Demographic Factor Analysis of the Survey Audience

Statistical surveys of gender, age, educational background, star-chasing experience, and other factors preliminarily reflect the diversity of the selected samples. In terms of gender, there were 69 males and 208 females, accounting for 24.91% and 75.09% respectively, which aligns with the gender composition of star-chasing groups. Regarding age, the main survey population was between 18 and 40 years old, with 239 people accounting for 86.28%. There were 25 people between 40 and 55 years old (9.03%), 13 people under 18 years old (4.69%), and the group aged 25-40 was the largest, which is helpful for our research on fans' emotional labor input. In terms of educational background, 190 respondents had bachelor's degrees (68.59%), 44 had junior college degrees (15.88%), 16 had high school education or below (5.78%), and 27 had graduate degrees or above (9%). Educational background shows diversity but mainly concentrates at the undergraduate level. Regarding star-chasing experience, 86 people had more than three years of experience (31.05%), 107 occasionally paid attention (38.63%), 49 had between one and three years (17.69%), and 35 had less than one year (12.64%). From the perspective of star-chasing experience, about 70% of the questionnaire sample had long star-chasing experience and better understanding of the internal composition of fan circles and relevant experiences of sports stars, which helps us survey the emotional labor input of sports stars.

## 4.2 Correlation and Regression Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Star Fans and Patriotic Emotion Change of Sports Star Fans

To verify the relationship between sports stars' emotional labor input and fans' patriotic emotion degree, the three factors were transformed into corresponding constants and variables for analysis, yielding the following results.

**4.2.1 Correlation Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Stars and Patriotic Emotion of Fans** Pearson correlation analysis was used to study the relationship between sports star fans' emotional labor input and fans' degree of patriotism. The results showed (see Table 1 ) a significant positive correlation between sports star fans' emotional labor input and fans' degree of patriotism, with a correlation coefficient of 0.480\*\*.

**4.2.2 Regression Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Stars and Patriotic Emotion of Fans** Subsequently, regression analysis was conducted. The regression equation significance was 0, indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The regression equation coefficient of 0.369 with significance of 0.000 passed the significance test. The regression equation shows that sports stars' emotional labor input has a significant positive impact on fans' patriotism. The higher the emotional labor input of sports star fans to sports stars, the higher the patriotic degree of fans.

Through regression analysis, a significant linear relationship was found between "patriotic labor input of sports stars" and "degree of patriotic emotion." The regression model is established, and research hypothesis H1 is supported.

## 4.3 Correlation and Regression Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Star Fans and Patriotic Emotional Labor Willingness of Sports Star Fans

**4.3.1 Correlation Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Stars and Fans' Willingness to Pay Patriotic Labor** Pearson correlation analysis was used to study the relationship between sports star fans' emotional labor input and fans' degree of patriotic emotion. The results show (see Table 3 ) a significant positive correlation between emotional labor input and fans' patriotic emotional labor willingness, with a correlation coefficient of 0.367\*\*.

**4.3.2 Regression Analysis of Emotional Labor Input of Sports Stars and Fans' Willingness to Pay Patriotic Labor** Subsequently, regression analysis was conducted. The regression equation significance was 0, indicating a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The regression equation coefficient of 0.220 with significance of 0.000 passed the significance test. The regression equation shows that sports stars' emotional labor input has a significant positive impact on fans' willingness to pay for

patriotic emotional labor. The higher the emotional labor input of sports star fans to sports stars, the higher the fans' willingness to pay for patriotic emotional labor.

Through regression analysis, a significant linear relationship was found between "patriotic emotional labor input of sports star fans" and "patriotic emotional willingness to work." The regression model is established, and research hypothesis H2 is supported.

#### **4.4 Analysis of the Emotional Labor Input of Sports Stars and the Change of Fans' Patriotic Emotion and Their Patriotic Emotional Willingness to Pay**

According to the research results, audiences prefer emerging sports stars such as Ma Long and Wang Meng, and know little about veteran sports stars such as Yao Ming and Deng Yaping. This is because, in the era of consumption, capital has played an important role in promoting culture. Under capital promotion, "everything is a commodity and a symbol," and the symbolic value of sports stars has become the product of "fans" and secular culture. As Baudrillard points out, the truth of consumer society is that "coding rules replace references" and "self-fulfilling predictions." Due to recent popular international sports events, excellent athletes stand out in their respective fields and are frequently reported by official and short video platforms. Sports stars have been sought after by fans and gradually promoted to become emerging sports stars by capital, expanding their influence.

The study found that 53.79% of the audience survey respondents will buy products endorsed by sports stars; 35.38% will make data for sports stars; 31.77% will participate in offline activities of stars; 29.96% will create promotional videos for stars; and 17.69% will write fanfiction for stars for publicity. Over the past two decades, digital upgrades have influenced how people perceive, consume, and use media. For fan culture, the influence of digital technology is first reflected in technological empowerment, which is consistent with early academic and industry optimism about technological democracy. Digital technology has also changed the form of fan practice itself. For example, Booth studied digital fans and transformed the "gift economy" into a "digi-gratis economy." As producers and consumers of data, fans are more inclined toward digital practice labor to close the relationship between idols and fans, as well as among fans themselves. Fan groups have become a new social group for idols. In the survey, the audience is more inclined to buy products endorsed by sports stars, pay attention to their own material experience, and meet their own spiritual needs for idols. Secondly, when fans believe that the data generated by their data labor can be directly transformed into entertainment resources in the hands of their idols, fans establish emotional connections with their idols through "data" and realize this sense of intimacy through data practice. The results of the questionnaire survey also illustrate this point: doing data for stars and participating in their offline activities can indirectly be transformed into the commercial value of stars.

## 5. Summarize and Reflect

In this study, the patriotic feelings of sports star fans were examined theoretically through interview research and questionnaire survey methods, attempting to answer questions about the correlation between emotional labor and patriotism. According to the research, the higher the emotional labor investment of sports star fans in sports stars, the higher the degree of fans' patriotic emotion. Additionally, the higher the emotional labor input of sports star fans to sports stars, the higher the labor willingness of fans to pay patriotic emotion. Both hypotheses are established. At the same time, the following enlightenment emerges.

### 5.1 Sports Star Image and Fans' Values

Research has proven that the higher the emotional labor input of sports star fans to stars, the stronger fans' patriotic feelings. Because sports stars themselves have emotional traction for fans, fans place their pursuit of personal ability and yearning for a better life on their idols and make efforts for them. Therefore, fans invest substantial emotional labor in the careers of idols. The image of sports stars is the portrayal of fans' spiritual sustenance and spiritual pursuit. Fans further understand the training and winning experiences of sports stars winning glory for the country, thereby strengthening fans' patriotic feelings. Through the connection between sports stars and national honors, it guides fans to pay attention to national events and China's international image, stimulates fans' nationalist feelings, and paves the way for improving the willingness of patriotic emotional labor, thereby deepening fans' patriotic feelings.

As a subcultural group, the fan group has received wide attention from society in recent years. With the introduction of national policies and continuous technological development, the integration of fan culture into mainstream culture has become a general trend, and the country advocates the cultivation of "positive energy fans." In this respect, the fan base actively embraces the label of positive energy fans. "No idol in front of the country" has become a consensus among fans. As idols aligned with mainstream values, sports stars play a very important role in guiding the construction of fans' patriotic values. When fan groups devote emotional labor to sports stars, they form a fan community relationship. When sports stars winning glory for the country becomes a common topic among fans, it is easier to arouse national pride among fans. When the fan community makes patriotic expression in cyberspace, the emotional interaction easily forms patriotic empathy force. In addition, expression in cyberspace is a low-cost expression of opinions. Therefore, fans and patriots are more catalyzed by emotional mobilization. The strong interaction of social media enables fans to use various small screen media to produce emotional proximity (affective proximity)—that is, "users are closer to media characters in terms of space, time, and emotion." The strong interaction of social media deepens the expression of patriotic feelings among fans, which turns into collective action. The patriotic behavior of fans often occurs when the country faces a public opinion

crisis or public disaster, such as the Emperor Bar and Wuhan epidemic incidents. Fans work together and make great contributions. Under the consistent goal of overcoming difficulties together, the barriers of the circle layer and the magnitude of idols are hidden in collective power, replaced by cross-circle union and information sharing. Under public issues, patriotic fans who were originally single nodes can hide their personal identity, and fans already share the same label of “rice circle girl,” allowing originally small individual power to be seen.

## 5.2 Sports Star Image and Fans’ Emotional Labor

“A star is a brand that performs.” This statement makes it clear that sports stars are not just tools for advertising and product endorsement, but also cultural products. A good personal image of sports stars can not only help expand their influence, but also guide the public to form correct values. The image of sports stars favored by the public has six aspects: external image, moral style, sports level, competitive style, social responsibility, and fan relationship. In this study, the main factors that attract fans are excellent competitive performance and good moral style. Sports stars have won competitive honor for the country, been frequently praised by official media, actively done public welfare, and made contributions to society. At the same time, based on the public’s trust and attention to official media, positive reports from China Central Television and other official media also increase certain social influence for sports stars. Relatively speaking, in the stage of sports stars’ persona maintenance, fans are both producers and consumers of the symbolic value of sports stars. As Baudrillard states in *The Consumer Society*, “the purpose of consumption is not the satisfaction of actual needs, but the constant pursuit of manufactured and stimulated desire satisfaction. In other words, what people consume is not the use value of goods and services, but their ‘symbolic symbolism.’” Sports stars, sought after by their fans, are actually representative symbols of national honor, “commodities” shaped by capital and the media. The root cause of fans’ pursuit of sports stars comes from “homogeneous” emotional relationship cognition. Community organizations based on consensus emotional experience and established with sports stars as the core constitute the group for the production and consumption of sports stars. Accordingly, fans’ expectations and aesthetics directly affect the image construction of sports stars.

The good personal image of sports stars is more likely to be sought after by fans and is more conducive to fans’ emotional labor input. In the practice of “Fan-huan,” data is not only used as a quantitative expression of fans’ emotions, but also becomes a “transitional object” to communicate the intimate relationship between fans and idols. Although compared with traffic stars, the commercial value of sports stars with their own competitive strength is not completely dependent on fans’ data labor, in the digital era, the commercial value of sports stars and the influence of fans are closely related to the list data of the microblog platform. The more the image of sports stars meets fans’ expectations, the more emotional labor investment fans will make, which is also conducive

to expanding the influence of sports stars. This in turn restricts part of the behavior of sports stars and urges them to bring positive influence to the fan group. With the improvement of the platform's fan management system, fans' emotional labor is more inclined toward community communication on the microblog platform. "Opinion leaders" in the fan group release relevant comments and tasks, which are then completed by relevant fans. In the process of chasing stars together, the internal communication of fan groups also strengthens the attraction of sports stars to fans.

### 5.3 Summary

The generation process of sports stars' personality is not only the result of social reproduction, but also the symbolic form of individual symbols in consumer society. Once the personality of sports stars is formed, it shows that the individual as stars not only represents the "heroes" in the field of sports, but also represents roles and symbols in social culture. As sports stars, while being pursued by fans, they should also assume their own social responsibilities. In recent years, the country has paid great attention to the field of competitive sports, and the rewards brought by China's honors in competitive sports are also obvious to all. The honor and spirit of China's competitive sports not only represent the hardworking and enterprising spirit of the Chinese people, but also deeply inspire the patriotism of the Chinese people. In the era of traffic, the influence of sports stars on the field of sports competition and even society is further amplified. From the research and interviews, we can see that sports stars are popular more because of their personality charm and honor, and sports stars are spreading a spiritual power of positive energy. Thirdly, positive reports of sports stars by mainstream media also play a role in restraining and guiding fans and promoting their love for sports stars. Fans' love for sports stars is more influenced by the star's spiritual guidance and excellent will quality. Sports stars' positive energy plays a role model role, driving fans to understand the traditional Chinese sports spirit, the struggle, and the never-give-up will quality, helping fans deeply feel the concept that collective interests are greater than individual interests and the concept of honor and dishonor. The image of sports stars is not only related to their personal development future, but also has a certain connection with the national image and social image. As qualified sports stars, they should always keep a clear head, focus on improving personal competitive sports level, actively participate in social public welfare undertakings, and shoulder their own social responsibilities.

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