Collaborative Alienation and Power Reconfiguration in Sports Fandom Governance

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Abstract: The migration of fan culture into sports has created "sports fan circles", enhancing athlete visibility but introducing governance challenges. Drawing on media ecology theory, this study examines power redistribution among platforms, organizations, and fans. We propose "informal power networks" and "collaborative alienation" as analytical concepts, arguing that emotionally charged fan practices displace formal governance. An adaptive model is proposed based on three pillars: platform responsibility re-embedding, organizational authority repositioning, and fan self-regulation.

Keywords: Sports fandom; Media ecology; Collaborative alienation; Informal power networks; Governance

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of media has extended fan culture from entertainment into competitive sports, creating what scholars term "sports fan circles." While increasing athlete visibility, this phenomenon generates significant governance challenges, including online harassment and emotional polarization. Current governance approaches remain fragmented, often treating platforms, organizations, and fans as isolated actors rather than examining their relational dynamics.

This study adopts a media ecology perspective to analyze structural governance failures. Through case analysis of online discourse surrounding elite athletes, the study develops two conceptual tools—informal power networks and collaborative alienation—to explain why multi-actor governance arrangements repeatedly malfunction.

2. Analysis of the sports fandom mechanism in the media environment

2.1. Structural mechanisms and algorithmic logic of social media platforms

Social media platforms have evolved from mere information channels into primary arenas for public discourse [1].

Mechanisms such as trending lists, algorithmic recommendations, and traffic distribution collectively constitute an "attention economy." For instance, the "Shatou" pairing topic involving table tennis players Sun Yingsha and Wang Chuqin was algorithmically pushed to interested and potentially interested users, creating an "information cocoon" effect. Content promoted by platforms gains higher exposure and interaction, which in turn reinforces algorithmic biases, fostering group "self-indulgence" within these digital cocoons.

Algorithms not only cater to user interests but also seek to expand them, a strategy aligned with platform business goals [2]. Within this system, controversial, emotional, and idol-related content is more likely to capture attention. Such inflammatory discourse shapes the public opinion field, motivating fan bases to compete for exposure through strategic behaviors like "ranking", "comment control", and "topic boosting." Platform algorithms subtly guide and amplify group opposition and extreme emotions, compressing the space for rational dialogue while making emotional mobilization and conflict narratives primary drivers of traffic.

2.2. Emotional mobilization and organized action in fan communities

Sports fan communities exhibit organizational traits reminiscent of entertainment fandoms, yet are distinguished by their incorporation of competitive sports motifs, including national pride, athletic passion, and heroic narrative. Operating across platforms such as Weibo Super Topics, Douban groups, and WeChat communities, these groups execute coordinated opinion campaigns in support of—or opposition to—targeted athletes.

A case in point is the Eileen Gu Super Topic community during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, where fans self-organized into functional units like "Data Groups" and "Anti-Defamation Groups." These teams engaged in ranking management, comment control, and topic maintenance—tactics reflecting both emotional attachment and strategic communication aimed at amplifying the athlete's public voice. As noted by one participant, "More data means greater commercial attention from brands and media."

These activities enhance athlete visibility while reinforcing collective identity through the construction of a "common adversary", thereby strengthening group cohesion. When amplified by platform algorithms, such emotionally driven engagement can escalate into widespread online mobilization, further entrenching the structural and symbolic boundaries of the fan circle.

2.3. Weakening of the discourse and marginalization of the role of sports organizations

In the traditional media era, official communications from sports organizations held a unique authority as primary information sources. However, in today's platform-dominated environment, traditional sports organizations—such as associations, clubs, and event operators—increasingly find their discursive power diminished. Xie Zhenhua and Xue Wenting observe that the emotional attributes of sports public opinion on social media are amplified, challenging traditional agenda-setting capacity [3]. Official discourse often lacks the adaptability to compete with fan-generated content in terms of speed, emotional appeal, and dissemination strategy, sometimes even raising doubts about its authenticity.

Some organizations, driven by commercial interests, tacitly permit or even encourage fan circle behaviors, further blurring the boundaries between official engagement and fan culture. Such practices gradually erode the authority and effectiveness of sports organizations in guiding public opinion and regulating behavior.

2.4. The formation and operation of the "informal power network"

The traditional governance structure centered on sports organizations is being displaced within the platform–

organization–fans triad by an emergent "informal power network" driven by platform traffic and emotional capital. In this reconfigured dynamic, organizations are increasingly marginalized, while fan groups assume greater influence. A telling example is the delayed response of China's Table Tennis and Badminton Center to the disbanding of Wang Chuqin's fan club in early 2025 [4]. While fan-generated content spreads rapidly via algorithmic amplification, official communication lags, underscoring the shifting locus of discursive control.

This shift is further illustrated by an analysis of 250 Weibo comments on the Quan Hongchan "growth period" controversy. Nearly half (47.5%) of responses fell under "fan culture and participation", predominantly expressing supportive (52.84%) and tolerant (23.05%) sentiments. In contrast, critical viewpoints accounted for only 2.48% and were largely framed by media-led discourse. The disparity highlights not only the numerical dominance of fan voices but also their capacity to steer public opinion through emotional mobilization and comment management—a manifestation of the informal power network reshaping sports fandom.

3. The dilemma of fan governance: Synergistic alienation and pseudo-institutionalized structure

3.1. Analysis of the true manifestations of "failure of co-governance

Governance of sports fan circles has proven ineffective largely because what is termed "co-governance" often remains superficial. Platforms may introduce "anti-fan circle" policies, organizations advocate for rational support, and fan groups profess self-discipline. Yet during critical public opinion events, platforms frequently prioritize traffic, organizations opt for silence to protect their image, and fans intensify emotional mobilization. The result is governance in name only—a slogan with negligible practical impact.

Data from the Quan Hongchan case (**Figures 1–3**) confirms this distortion, showing fan-driven discourse dominated by supportive sentiment. As athletes become "symbolized", a "three-way misalignment" emerges: platforms extend traffic cycles by pushing controversial topics, organizations remain silent, and fans dominate opinion through emotional mobilization. Ultimately, "co-governance" fails, devolving into a cycle where platform profit-seeking resonates with fan emotion.
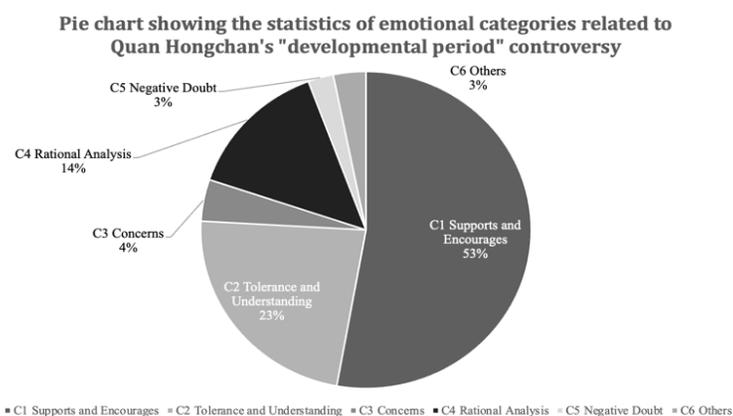

Figure 1. Statistics of emotional categories related to Quan Hongchan's "developmental period" controversy
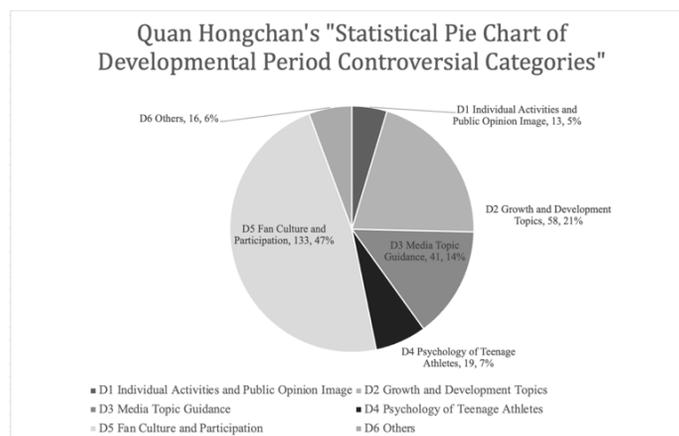
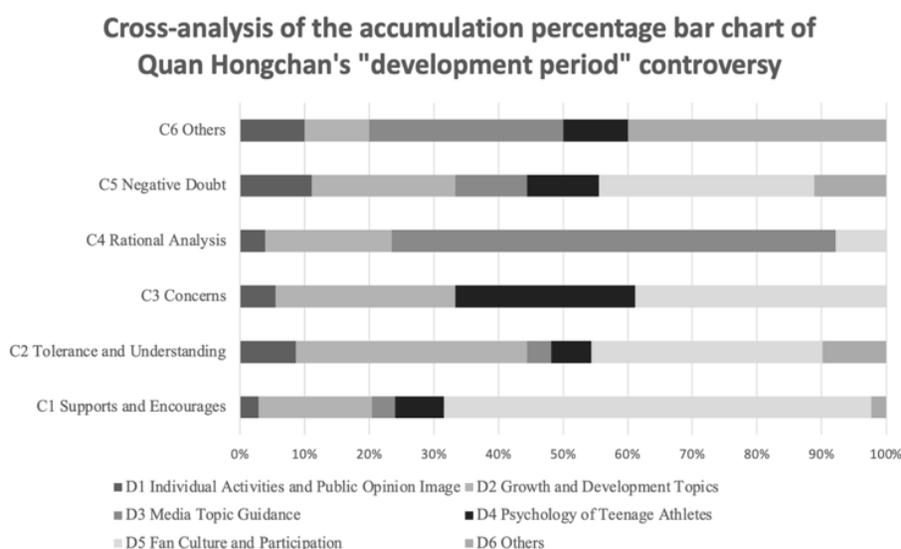**Figure 2.** Quan Hongchan's "statistical pie chart of developmental period controversial categories"

Figure 3. Cross-analysis of the accumulation percentage bar chart of Quan Hongchan's "developmental period" controversy

3.2. Platform-organization-fan motivation misalignment and "synergistic alienation"

The core issue in governance failure is the fundamental misalignment of motives among the three parties, which leads "collaborative governance" to degenerate into conflict. Platforms are profit-driven, prioritizing traffic over timely intervention. Organizations are image-conscious, often responding vaguely or remaining silent. Fans are emotionally mobilized and prone to defensive or aggressive actions. Power in sports fan circles arises from the confluence of emotion, capital, and technology. Platform profit logic and fan emotional mobilization reinforce each other in the public sphere, squeezing the governance space available to organizations. The "mob effect" drives irrational polarization, and organizational silence exacerbates the alienation of so-called "co-governance" [5].

For instance, following Xiao Ruoteng's controversial loss in the Tokyo Olympics men's gymnastics all-around, platforms like Weibo and Douyin failed to control the spread of related topics and instead pushed terms like "unfair refereeing" to trending lists, reaping traffic benefits. The Chinese Gymnastics Association did not

respond immediately, allowing fans to frame the incident as "national humiliation" and unleash fierce online condemnation. While ostensibly "upholding justice", this primarily served as an outlet for collective sentiment. This misalignment of motives effectively distorts "co-governance" into a competitive game, undermining its intended outcomes.

3.3. Ambiguous rights and responsibilities and governance idleness in the proposed institutionalized structure

Current governance measures exhibit "pseudo-institutionalized" flaws: they establish a framework but lack enforceability and clear accountability, resulting in governance inertia. Social platforms introduce "community conventions"—for example, Weibo's three-month "Sports Fan Ecosystem Governance" initiative in 2024 and the subsequent dissolution of "Athlete Super Topic" communities in February 2025, alongside adjustments to trending and complaint mechanisms. While such measures may offer short-term relief, fans often adapt by using abbreviations or other tactics to evade controls. Complaint mechanisms can themselves be co-opted by fans for organized activities like "anti-defamation" campaigns.

Even when organizations do break silence—as when the Chinese table tennis team urged rational discourse amid online harassment—such appeals often remain one-off statements without sustained action, reflecting the broader pattern of institutional retreat. Li Luhao critiques this as a "rule of law absence", where governance remains at the level of administrative and moral appeal without binding force [5]. While some fans advocate internal self-discipline, extreme factions persist in boundless "support" activities. These pseudo-institutional arrangements lack clear enforcement mechanisms, rendering them ineffective during crises.

3.4. Deep out-of-control mechanisms under the logic of "synergistic alienation"

Under the combined effects of collaborative alienation and pseudo-institutionalization, sports fan circle governance faces a deep-seated structural dysfunction. The root cause lies in informal power networks operating above formal governance structures. Fan communities, leveraging KOLs, self-media, and social platforms, often hold discursive advantages over organizations and platforms during sudden opinion incidents. Meanwhile, platforms, organizations, and fans engage in blame-shifting, creating governance gaps. Fueled by algorithmic push and group psychology, emotional public opinion spreads rapidly, marginalizing rational voices and eroding the foundational values of sports.

The power of sports fan circles stems from the synergy of emotion, capital, and technology, granting informal networks greater mobilizing capacity than formal institutions within digital media environments. Driven by the "mob effect", fan polarization frequently breaches institutional constraints [5]. When organizations remain silent, and platforms are profit-driven, governance inevitably stagnates [6]. Thus, the profound loss of control is not merely a failure of enforcement but a structural outcome of power alienation within the contemporary media environment.

4. Construction of governance fit models and path assumptions

The preceding analysis indicates that governance failure stems from motivational misalignment among platforms, organizations, and fans, coupled with the ineffectiveness of "pseudo-institutionalized" measures. In response, the study proposes a tripartite adaptive governance model designed to re-embed platform responsibility, reposition organizational authority, and encourage fan self-adjustment, thereby constraining informal power networks and rebalancing interests within the sports fan circle ecosystem (**Figures 1–2**).
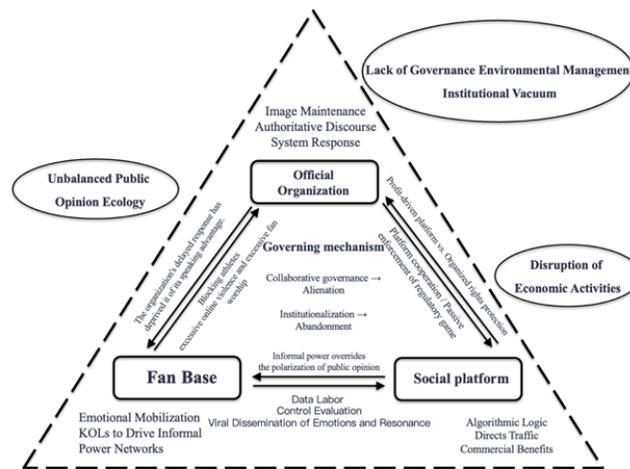
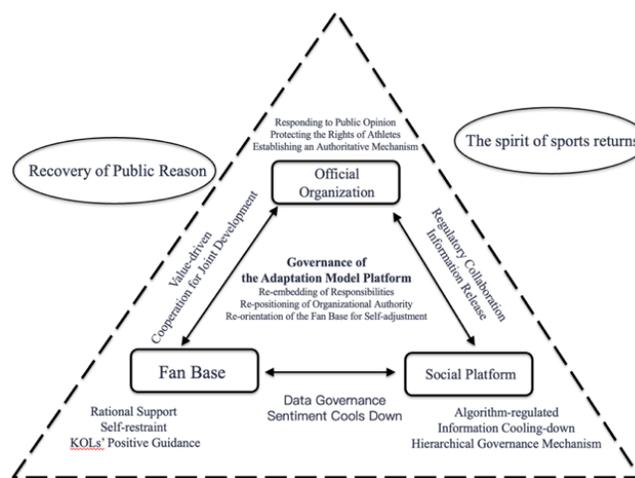**Figure 4.** The activity mechanisms of the three adaptation model

Figure 5. Platform—organization—fan tripartite

4.1. Re-embedding of platform responsibility

Platforms must transcend their role as mere technical intermediaries to become accountable governance actors. Rather than prioritizing traffic, they should embed oversight into algorithmic design—implementing "information cooling" mechanisms for contentious topics and adopting multi-tiered response systems that move beyond simplistic account bans. Legal frameworks should ensure accountability for violations like cyber violence. Only through such re-embedded responsibility can the stemming from algorithm-fan resonance be effectively addressed.

4.2. Repositioning of organizational authority

The absence and silence of sports organizations during crises significantly contribute to the escalation of fan sentiment. Past tendencies to remain silent due to "image concerns" have proven counterproductive, as vague responses fail to quell controversy and instead expose athletes to greater public pressure. Organizations must strike a balance between maintaining an "official voice" and responding effectively to public opinion. Regular official updates can provide fans with authentic information about athletes. Clear, timely stances during controversies are essential to prevent fan communities and self-media from monopolizing the discourse space. Institutionally, athlete

rights protection should be strengthened—for example, through the establishment of public opinion protection plans that ensure clear and timely response protocols when disputes erupt.

Athletes' personal voices, especially in controversies concerning them, provide crucial guidance for fans. Athletes should be supported in enhancing their public image and professionalism, serving as role models and sources of national pride, and guiding fan behavior constructively rather than being drawn into unnecessary public opinion battles. Organizations can facilitate planned, positive interactions between athletes and fans, fostering healthy relationships and mitigating extreme behaviors driven by group sentiment.

4.3. Self-adjustment of the fan group

Fans should be recognized not as mere objects of governance but as essential participants within the governance network. Excluding them risks positioning them in opposition to other actors. Governance efforts should therefore encourage internal self-adjustment within fan bases. This can involve guiding fan communities to establish "rational support" conventions, empowering constructive KOLs to play stabilizing roles, and curbing the spread of extreme rhetoric. During moments of group impulse, KOLs should step forward to calm sentiments, promote objective analysis, and collaborate with organizations to ensure a conducive environment for athletes.

Schools and media should prioritize educating underage fans on sportsmanship and rational expression. Governance can only be truly realized when fan participation evolves from pure emotional mobilization toward reasoned and responsible engagement. Ultimately, fans must recognize that the informal power networks constructed in new media environments cannot be dominated solely by fan groups but require the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders to build a healthy and sustainable sports fan circle ecology.

4.4. Proposal of the governance fit model

Synthesizing these proposals, the study advances a "Tripartite Adaptation Model" that re-embeds platform responsibility, repositions organizational authority, and cultivates fan self-adjustment—collectively rebalancing power within the sports fandom ecosystem. These three components are not simply superimposed but are designed to interact dynamically, achieving a new balance of power and institutional embedding within the media environment. Only through such an integrated approach can sports fan circle governance transition from a pattern of "passive response" to one of "active shaping."

5. Conclusion

This study identifies motive misalignment among platforms, organizations, and fans as the core cause of governance failure in sports fan circles. The proposed concepts of informal power networks and collaborative alienation offer new analytical lenses for understanding these dynamics. The tripartite adaptation model provides a framework for rebalancing power relations through platform responsibility re-embedding, organizational authority restoration, and fan self-regulation.

While limited in scope and requiring further validation, this research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical governance of contemporary sports fandom.

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