

The Effect of Fandom's Popularity on Chinese Table Tennis Players

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Abstract: In sports, fandom is on the rise, which is mirrored in table tennis matches as well. The paper intends to analyze how the popularity of fandom impacts on Chinese table tennis players through some specific cases of social media, athlete brand image and sport environment. Taken together, these findings imply that social media can motivate sport fandom, which encourages players, promotes table tennis development but in turn exacerbates cyberbullying. Moreover, fans' support could enhance commercial value of athletes while fandom in sport environment may affect athletes' mentality and performance as well.

1. Introduction

As China's national ball, table tennis is an enormously popular sport in China. In the Tokyo Olympic Games, with the excellent performance, the table tennis team of China won four gold medals successfully. By virtue of that, Chinese table tennis players have received a great deal of affection from their supporters, which has resulted in a surge in fandom.

The term "Fandom" (p. 257) can broadly be defined in sports as an individual or group of a game or sporting event that satisfies the fundamental needs of the audience (Dionísio et al., 2008)^[1]. Chinese table tennis players have a more significant "fandom" phenomena than athletes in other sports do in China, particularly a few notable players who have a sizable fan following. Fandom may enormously support table tennis players. However, some terrible behaviors in the fandom do affect the athletes. Fan Zhendong, a member of the Chinese men's table tennis team, released a statement urging the public to focus solely on his performance in the competition and not on his off-site everyday life or usual training. Besides, the Chinese Olympic Committee (2021) issued that all sections of society should respect athletes' personal rights and interests, chase stars sensibly, avoid inappropriate comments and actions, and forcefully put an end to the spread of fandom chaos to the sports fields^[2].

Little research has been focused on the impact of fandom on Chinese table tennis players. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to study what and how these factors affect athletes and put forward some advice according to the conclusions. Meanwhile, the paper may assist with future in-depth research and inquiry.

2. The Effect of Fandom's Popularity on Chinese Table Tennis Players

2.1. Social media

The media pervades and influences almost every aspect of life in contemporary civilizations. Obviously, sports fall within this category. Likewise, in table tennis. More people improve their interaction and understanding of table tennis as a result of the media's publicity and introduction. Fans comment on their on-field performance as well as personal lives. Recent research has suggested that social media provided fans with an additional method to engage with their team deeply and were a marvelous platform for sports organizations to better master fan motivations and strengthen fan relationships (Stavros et al., 2014)^[3]. It builds a two-way collaborative relationship and shows mutual advantages to both athletes and fans. Fans on social media, for example, make affectionate comments and supports for their favorite players in table tennis matches which boosts table tennis players' confidence. Meanwhile, table tennis organizations can better comprehend the ideas of fans, contributing to the development of table tennis's promotion plan.

Nonetheless, the negative interactions between fandoms and other users on sites like Weibo has increased thanks to social media (Yin, 2021)^[4]. This could exacerbate the issue of cyberbullying. For example, in the table tennis mixed doubles final of the Tokyo Olympic Games, Chinese combination Xu Xin / Liu Shiwen lost 4-3 to Japanese combination. On the Internet, some unscrupulous Chinese fans claimed they had lost the face of Chinese table tennis. The Tokyo Olympic women's singles winner is also a victim of cyberbullying. After winning the women's table tennis singles, Chen Meng said passionately, "My time has finally come!" and was hacked considerably on the Internet such as "your era is over!" (Observed on Weibo, August 2021). Experiencing cyberbullying was most likely to have an emotional impact. Anger, grief, shame, irritation, annoyance, dread, and feeling afraid have all been experienced by victims of cyberbullying (Beran & Li, 2005; Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Price & Dalgleish, 2010)^[5,6,7]. These events might cause serious harm on athletes' spirits which may affect their on-field performance.

2.2. Athlete Brand Image

China has consistently been a major sports nation. Along with the enhanced commercial value of the sports industry, public enthusiasm in sports and players has increased as well. Arai et al. (2013) discover that athletic performance, beautiful look, and marketable lifestyle are three characteristics of an athlete's brand image that are critical in creating consumer brand equity for athletes^[8]. Athletes' brand and commercial value can be linked with their own characteristics, not merely their figure, look, and style. For example, table tennis players such as Olympic champions Ma Long, Chen Meng and Liu Shiwen have good body fitness and personal charms, accompanied by their own table tennis style in the competition. Therefore, some well-known Chinese table tennis players are of great commercial value. Due to the popularity of table tennis in China, it has attracted many sponsors, including Shanghai Double Happiness Company, a leading sponsor of the Olympics and other major sports events, and Li Ning, a famous Chinese sportswear maker. This might boost public awareness and user stickiness of the brand.

What's more, fans' desire for purchase relevant table tennis products and endorsement products might rise due to their adoration of sports stars, which is beneficial for establishing athletes' brand image. Chinese table tennis players have an unwavering will to accomplish their goals. Their positive influence on national dignity and pride, along with their admirable, optimistic, and inspirational image, helps to foster fans' trust and increases fans' propensity to pay for the products they endorsed. Table tennis players show various personal charms. Fans are fascinated with characteristics and spirits of them, and their popularity has made brand companies aware of their potential commercial value.

Thus, fans' enthusiasm for table tennis players has promoted the signing and collaboration of sponsors and athletes. Brand companies utilize table tennis players' individual accomplishments and popularity to bolster their product image and sales, which not only effectively elevates commercial success and purchase intent, but also ultimately achieves the greatest economic and social benefits.

2.3. Sport Environment

The sports environment here only refers to the scene of table tennis players' competition, which is more appropriate to study the impact of fans' behavior on athletes. Table tennis is a sport that demands close attention to detail. Athletes' psychology and spirit are intensely concentrated during competition, thus in order to make proper judgements, they must attentively watch the rotation direction of their opponent's table tennis racket when it strikes the ball with their eyes. Experienced table tennis players are typically quite adaptable to the sport environment since they have competed in many different nations and venues. Despite this, the fans at the game may somewhat affect their attitude and performance. However, the table tennis series might not obtain consistent attention and financial support without the support of fans from various countries. It is illustrated that favorable sport-environmental elements and social support may have a positive influence on athletes' mental health, and vice versa (Kuettel et al., 2019) ^[9]. Some fan inappropriate behaviors while watching games may hinder their judgment during the match.

On the upside, for example, a large number of fans cheer for their favorite players at the site of the National Games and the Table Tennis Super League. The gymnasium creates a positive atmosphere which helps to stimulate the potential of athletes. Previous research has suggested that major events have the power to inspire audiences to be more active in sport themselves (Ramchandani&Coleman, 2012) ^[10]. After watching the wonderful table tennis game, it may inspire the audience to participate in table tennis. On the downside, for example, in the National Games and Table Tennis Super League, many supporters celebrated their favorite athletes by holding banners with players' names. There were even low-quality spectators booing athletes they disliked. The stadium was no longer a pure cheering sound, mixed with screams and shouts which disturbed athletes' attention to some degree. Some people even use flashing lights, which have a significant impact on table tennis matches. The quality and hit rate of the return ball can be impacted by flashing lights because they can cause players' eyes to flash, making it challenging for them to evaluate the rotation of the table tennis ball.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to identify the effect of fandom's popularity on Chinese table tennis players through some specific cases on three aspects: social media, athlete brand image and sport environment.

According to these analyses, social media has contributed to sport fandom and improved the public's understanding of table tennis. Simultaneously, fans can better interact with their favorite table tennis players while table tennis organizations might create marketing plans depending on the requirements of their fans, contributing to the development of table tennis. However, athletes may experience psychological and emotional challenges due to unfavorable social media reviews and even more serious cyberbullying. From commercial perspective, brand company may not only consider the relevant performance of athletes and their own characteristics, but also fans' preference which effectively invigorates purchase intention, brand value and commercial success. Fandom in sport environment like the scene of competitions may inspire the audience to play table tennis but affect athletes' mentality and performance during the competition.

More proper guidance may be offered to fans and athletes. For fans, they should understand that fandom is inappropriate for athletes. Instead, they ought to appreciate athletes' on-field performances rather than their personal lives and refrain from attacking athletes online. Every athlete is deserving

of admiration. For Chinese table tennis players, when confronted with the complex network world and competition scenes, they must recognize the pros and cons, remain faithful to their original heart, and remain sober in their matches.

4. Limitations and Future Research

These findings cannot be extrapolated to the influence of other factors in the effect of fandom's popularity on Chinese table tennis players such as their personal life. More far-reaching research is needed.

4.1. Athletes' Psychological and Behavioral Changes

The influence of fandom on Chinese table tennis players should be carefully studied. After the Chinese table tennis players exemplified in this paper are influenced by network comments and audience feedback in the on-site competition, what is their own psychological change state and whether it has an impact on their behavioral changes in the follow-up competition is also worthy of in-depth tracking and investigation.

4.2. Data Sources and Coverage

The paper is based on past studies and theoretical analysis, as well as findings based on certain Chinese internet comments and analysis of the on-site audience's performance. And the primary study subject are Chinese fans. The online observation is conducted primarily on Weibo, the largest social media platform in China. Other media should also be studied and discussed. Furthermore, this study concentrates merely on the most influential and powerful athletes at present among the Chinese table tennis teams. Domestic table tennis has a large market and is deeply loved by Chinese. We should further analyze it in combination with China's national conditions. Examples and phenomena mentioned in this paper are based almost on the period after the Tokyo Olympic Games, when table tennis's popularity skyrocketed, as did the proportion of fandom. Little consideration for the prior games and the focused period is relevantly transient. Investigation of certain phenomena should not be limited to recent domestic games in China, but should also include other international games (such as World Championships or World Cups).

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