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Esports Idol Fandom in China's Media Fan Culture Community: Formation, Challenges, and Governance

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Abstract

This study investigates the formation, evolution, and governance of Chinese esports "fan communities" from a cultural study perspective. With the rapid rise of esports in China—particularly through platforms such as the LPL and KPL—fan culture has undergone a transformation from loosely organized emotional affinity to highly structured digital mobilization. The paper explores how affective ties, idol construction, media dynamics, and platform capitalism converge to shape the behaviors and identities of fan participants. Drawing on cultural theory, the study critically examines the emotional economies that sustain fan loyalty, the symbolic labor of idols, and the ethical dilemmas posed by excessive fandom. Through the lens of governance, the research addresses the challenges of online misconduct, idol-fan power asymmetries, and the responsibilities of institutions in cultivating a healthier participatory culture. The findings underscore the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to regulating fan practices, one that is attentive to emotional intensity, symbolic structures, and cultural autonomy within digital public so as to realize business sustainability.

Keywords

Esports, fan culture community, affective business economy, digital governance,, idolization, media culture

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1 Introduction

Electric sports, which is briefly called esports, is a kind of competitive sports which use electric devices as sports equipment and follows a set of consistent contest rules (Li, 2004). As of Spring 2025, the League of Legends Pro League (LPL) in China witnessed Top Esports break a five-year title drought by clinching the Split 1 championship, underlining the league's competitive depth and market appeal (Villafana, 2025). Meanwhile, in the mobile-esports arena, the King Pro League (KPL) Spring 2025 launched with eighteen teams vying for a ¥15 million prize pool, signaling robust investment in Honor of Kings esports and the continued blurring of boundaries between console and mobile competitive cultures (Sarker, 2025).

Most of the e-sports events are organized as team competition with number of team members determined by game rules. Due to the virtuality of online games, players use virtual ID to as their names in team cooperations during competitions.

In 2003, the General Administration of Sport of China officially recognized esports as the country's 99th competitive sport. Over two decades later, the LPL and KPL have become pillars of China's esports ecosystem, drawing millions of viewers both online and in sold-out arenas such as Shanghai's Mercedes-Benz Arena and Guangzhou Gymnasium (Villafana, 2025; Sarker, 2025). Moreover, Chinese franchises' performances at international events—among them First Stand and the Asian Champions League Honor of Kings tournament—have further reinforced the nation's leadership in global esports governance and fan mobilization (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025).

The term "fan" originates from "fanatic", meaning an "enthusiast or devoted admirer" (Zhang & Fang, 2022). Contemporary esports fandom, particularly within the LPL and KPL scenes, has diversified beyond passive viewership to include coordinated cheering campaigns, digital content creation, and even cross-league exchange programs between Chinese and Korean fans, reflecting a participatory culture that Henry Jenkins describes as "spreadable media".

The recent surge in esports popularity has precipitated exponential growth in fan numbers, which gives rise to specialized "fan communities." Owing to the demographic profile of gamers, adolescents comprise a substantial portion of these fandoms (Zhang, Fan& Zhao, 2022). In such high-intensity environments, polarized online communities have occasionally escalated into doxxing and mass-reporting campaigns, prompting platforms and tournament organizers to implement stricter community guidelines and AI-driven moderation tools to balance freedom of expression with responsible conduct (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025).

2 Factors Behind Esports Fan Community Formation

The emergence of esports "fan communities" is multifactorial and no single factor is sufficient to explain their formation. This section examines four primary factors—fans, idols, commercial capital, and media—through the lens of cultural-business theory, highlighting how affective bonds, symbolic capital, platform economics, and mediated visibility intertwine to produce vibrant yet contested fan ecosystems.

2.1 Fans: Emotion as a Motivating Link

Fans within the community are bound by emotional ties, rendering the "fan community" a quasi-organizational entity. The formation of esports "fan communities" stems from fans' emotional connections to players, teams, and games. Data from iResearch indicate that in 2021, 61.4% of esports participants were aged between 0 and 24, with a predominance of adolescents. Emotional engagement between fans and their idols—players and teams—is intensified because the competition and contents of livestreams are similar to the daily games played by fans. This proximity between players and audiences fosters a unique sense of mirroring and identification, wherein fans perceive their idols as extensions of their own aspirations and skill trajectories.

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In this process, emotion does not merely operate as an expressive element, but becomes a constitutive force that binds individuals into symbolic collectives. Drawing from Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling", the esports fan community can be understood as a cultural formation wherein emotion is historically situated, socially shared, yet not fully formalized. The affective atmosphere created through live commentaries, chat interactions, and real-time performance generates a collective mood that orients individuals toward common attachments, fears, and hopes. These shared emotional intensities accumulate and circulate, forming what Sara Ahmed has termed "affective economies", where emotions do not reside in subjects but move between them, aligning bodies toward particular figures—such as esports idols—and producing boundaries of belonging.

Unlike traditional sports, where fans are often spectators positioned at a physical and symbolic distance from the field, esports fans engage in a hybrid mode of spectatorship that oscillates between consumption and participation. The architectural logic of platforms such as Huya, Douyu, and Bilibili enables a porous boundary between the professional and the amateur, the performer and the audience. The digital space not only hosts performances but also archives, recycles, and amplifies them through algorithmic circulation. Emotional engagement is thus constantly fed by repeated encounters—clips, edits, memes, and fan-generated content—producing a temporally extended yet intensely personal fandom experience.

Moreover, fan participation often exceeds the scope of the game itself. Supportive behaviors—such as sending virtual gifts, organizing voting campaigns, and defending idols in online conflicts—become practices through which emotional commitment is ritualized. These gestures, while seemingly immaterial, carry real economic and social implications. From a business perspective, such emotional investments create quantifiable "engagement" that feeds into platform monetization models and team sponsorship valuations. Yet beyond metrics, they also create an internal moral economy among fans, where loyalty, sacrifice, and exclusivity are constantly negotiated.

Inter-fan rivalries further reinforce intra-group cohesion, generating a sense of moral superiority or collective pride. The emotional landscape of these communities is rarely stable: moments of euphoria follow tournament victories, while losses or controversies can trigger collective mourning or blame allocation. This volatile affective rhythm sustains the community's internal dynamism, but it can also render it susceptible to factionalism or toxicity. In such contexts, emotional ties are not merely the glue of the community but also the terrain where power, hierarchy, and legitimacy are contested.

In sum, emotion in esports fan communities is not incidental; it is infrastructural. It structures how individuals enter, inhabit, and exit the community, how meaning is made and circulated, and how power is enacted within the collective. Emotional engagement, intensified by digital proximity and platform affordances, constitutes the cultural core of esports "fan communities", shaping not only their formation but also their endurance and volatility.

2.2 Idols: The Coexistence of Individuals and Teams

Within esports "fan communities", the concept of the idol is fluid, negotiated, and often contested. While in traditional entertainment or sports fandoms, idols are typically fixed individuals with well-curated public personas, esports disrupts this fixity through its platform-native immediacy and the porous boundaries between team-based identities and individual charisma. The tension between personal and collective allegiance becomes a central dynamic in the construction of esports fandom.

Individual players often serve as focal points for admiration due to their in-game performance, visible personalities during livestreams, or moments of heroism during high-stakes matches. Their appeal frequently stems not from a polished celebrity image but from a perceived authenticity—an accessibility enabled by regular, unscripted interactions on platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, or Twitch. These players become affective anchors, figures around whom fans rally and through whom they project personal aspirations, frustrations, and fantasies. However, this admiration is rarely passive. Fan communities often take on the work

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of "visibility management", engaging in ranking manipulations, defending reputations during controversies, or promoting fan edits and strategic comment placements to shape public perception.

Parallel to this individualized fandom is the allegiance to teams, which functions more collectively and often more stably. For some fans, the team represents a narrative of institutional legacy, regional pride, or organizational ethos. Teams that maintain consistent rosters and visible coaching systems tend to attract what might be called "structural fans"—those whose loyalty is rooted less in individual affect and more in the coherence and continuity of the team brand. In such cases, individual players may come and go, but the symbolic weight of the team persists. Fans aligned with this logic engage more actively with the team's seasonal performance arc, training updates, and overall strategies, emphasizing results and long-term growth over momentary brilliance.

These two modalities of fandom—individual-centric and team-centric—do not stand in simple opposition. They coexist, often uneasily, within the same community structures. The same fan may express fierce loyalty to a player while simultaneously supporting a club that may eventually trade or bench that player. This dual identification introduces internal contradictions: when an individual's interest conflicts with the strategic direction of a team, fans are forced to choose, justify, or fragment. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall's notion of "articulation" is instructive here: fan identity is not fixed but continuously rearticulated through shifting alignments, situational loyalties, and contingent investments.

Moreover, the existence of both team- and player-based fandoms fuels fan community behaviors such as coalition-building, factionalization, and discursive warfare. These phenomena are not merely products of online gossip but are structurally embedded within the affordances of digital platforms and the logic of attention economies. As fans mobilize to "speak for" or "protect" their idols—whether individual or institutional—they participate in what can be seen as grassroots reputation governance, a culturally loaded form of emotional labor and symbolic production.

Interactions between fans and idols—be they in chat rooms, at fan meetings, or through co-playing scenarios—are not only rituals of intimacy but also acts of boundary-making. They define who belongs in the community and who does not, who is a "true fan" and who is an outsider. The emotional charge embedded in these interactions reinforces a moral economy within fan communities, where commitment is constantly measured, ranked, and policed.

In this layered structure, idols are not merely passive recipients of adoration; they are symbolic sites through which fan identities are constructed, contested, and lived. Whether centered on a star player's fleeting brilliance or a team's long-term vision, the idol in esports fandom is always a node in a broader network of affect, narrative, and power. It is precisely this coexistence—and the tensions it produces—that sustains the vibrancy, volatility, and cultural specificity of esports "fan communities".

2.3 Capital: Driven by Profit

From being largely ignored a decade ago to becoming a core node of digital entertainment, esports today stands as a paradigmatic site of capital investment and platform monetization. The cultural formation of esports "fan communities" cannot be understood in isolation from the broader logics of platform capitalism and commercial spectacle. While fandom is often described in terms of emotional intensity and identity affiliation, its infrastructure is deeply shaped—and in some cases, orchestrated—by capital interests seeking to convert affect into measurable economic returns.

Esports clubs and players function not merely as participants in competition but as brands embedded in attention economies. The Chinese market, with its expansive mobile user base and highly digitized social media ecology, provides fertile ground for monetizing this attention. In such a context, "traffic" becomes not only a measure of visibility but a form of currency. Platform-driven algorithms prioritize those with sustained engagement, which in turn incentivizes capital to invest in teams and players capable of maintaining not just competitive performance but also online relevance. As such, performance metrics are increasingly

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entangled with popularity metrics, blurring the line between athletic success and digital charisma.

Fan communities, though often imagined as autonomous and organic, are subtly conditioned by this commercial logic. Emotional investment in idols frequently translates into concrete acts of spending—purchasing limited-edition merchandise, sending virtual gifts during livestreams, participating in crowd-funded billboard campaigns, or even paying for voting privileges in popularity rankings. These acts, while grounded in affective loyalty, function as revenue streams for clubs, players, platforms, and sponsors. Thus, the fan–idol relationship becomes economically productive: fans are not only cultural participants but also micro-investors whose emotional labor is appropriated as surplus value. Here, Arlie Hochschild's concept of "emotional labor", originally theorized in service industries, acquires a new dimension within digital fandom: the affective expressions of fans are commodified in ways that benefit capital while appearing voluntary and expressive.

Furthermore, capital does not merely respond to existing fan practices—it actively shapes them. Marketing campaigns, media narratives, and official social media operations often stage and amplify the idol status of players, curating moments of vulnerability, triumph, and intimacy that feed into the circuits of affective consumption. The appearance of authenticity—players "being themselves" in vlogs or casual interviews—is often the result of strategic branding, reinforcing the commodified intimacy that sustains fan loyalty. The more fans feel emotionally connected, the more they are likely to engage economically.

Esports clubs increasingly operate like entertainment studios: they recruit players not just for skill but for screen presence; they manage their image, direct their content, and optimize their media exposure. In such arrangements, the player becomes a composite figure—both athlete and influencer—whose value is measured by the convergence of match results and digital reach. Meanwhile, streaming platforms and content aggregators form strategic alliances with tournaments and clubs, further entrenching the capital–culture nexus.

Nevertheless, this profit-driven model is not without contradictions. The pursuit of exposure may at times clash with the logic of sport—player burnout, overexposure, or identity conflicts may emerge when individuals are reduced to their commercial utility. Moreover, the performative labor expected of players off the stage—constant streaming, social media maintenance, emotional responsiveness—can strain the authenticity on which fan loyalty depends. As fan communities become more media-savvy, they also become more aware of the machinery behind their own affective investments, occasionally leading to disillusionment or backlash.

In this way, capital functions not only as a background enabler but as a cultural agent—structuring how idols are shaped, how fans are mobilized, and how communities are imagined. The "fan community" is not a byproduct of esports popularity, but a cultivated terrain where emotional energies and economic flows are made to converge. While emotional satisfaction remains central to the fan experience, that satisfaction is increasingly embedded in commercial architectures designed to capture, modulate, and monetize attention.

2.4 Media: Chasing Spotlight and Engagement

As public interest in esports expands in tandem with the visibility and professionalization of competitions, media engagement plays an increasingly formative role in structuring the affective and discursive space of fan communities. No longer limited to niche forums or gaming-centered platforms, esports narratives are now actively disseminated across mainstream and entertainment media ecosystems, signaling a shift in its cultural positioning—from a subcultural practice to a complex, media-saturated domain with broad popular resonance.

In China, this transformation is especially pronounced. The international victories of Chinese League of Legends teams in 2018, 2019, and 2021 became flashpoints for national attention, not only generating celebratory discourse but also elevating esports as a site of collective pride and symbolic representation. Platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Zhihu quickly became arenas for emotional expression, dis-

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cursive contestation, and fan-organized media campaigns. These platforms do not merely serve as mirrors to existing enthusiasm; rather, they function as affective infrastructures that amplify, mediate, and at times reshape the affective rhythms of fan engagement. Media, in this context, is not simply a conduit—it is a co-producer of cultural meaning.

One of the central dynamics here is the logic of visibility. As John Thompson (1995) has argued, media visibility transforms the social relation between public figures and audiences into a symbolic interaction in which recognition and surveillance operate simultaneously. In esports, media technologies multiply these dynamics. The logic of livestreaming, for instance, creates a performative condition in which players are constantly watched, not just in their professional capacity but also as quasi-celebrities expected to entertain, emote, and relate. This visibility is algorithmically curated: players with higher emotional appeal or meme-worthy moments are more likely to receive platform amplification, feeding into cycles of increased fan attention and intensified media scrutiny.

A key feature of this process is the hybridization of media formats. The 2022 launch of Tencent Video's Clash to the Peak, a variety show blending entertainment celebrities with esports players, is emblematic of what Henry Jenkins (2006) terms "convergence culture". Here, the boundaries between sport, entertainment, and spectacle blur, and audiences from different sectors begin to converge around hybrid content. The result is not merely a numerical increase in viewership, but a qualitative transformation in audience composition, expectation, and expressive behavior. Fans drawn from entertainment fandoms bring with them a pre-existing grammar of engagement—such as fancam production, comment flooding, and idol marketing—which gradually reshape the cultural codes of esports fan communities.

This convergence produces both opportunity and tension. On the one hand, the influx of new fans contributes to the expansion of the esports fan base, injecting diverse energies and cross-disciplinary attention. On the other, it also introduces a reconfiguration of norms, as legacy fans who valorize in-game skill and competitive ethos may find themselves at odds with newer fans who prioritize personality, affective presence, or visual aesthetics. What emerges is a layered and at times conflicting set of fan identities, situated within overlapping media narratives and shaped by competing visions of what esports and its idols should represent.

The interplay between media institutions and fan communities is also increasingly shaped by platform economics. As attention becomes a monetizable asset, the design of media content—interviews, documentaries, behind-the-scenes footage—is tailored to maximize engagement metrics. This has the effect of deepening fan investment by inviting parasocial intimacy, while simultaneously reinforcing the commodification of both players and fandom itself. In this sense, media does not merely reflect the emotional energies of the esports world; it actively engineers them through narrative framing, visibility economies, and participatory architectures.

As media forms evolve, so too do the contours of the esports "fan community." From platform design to content strategy, media technologies increasingly dictate the tempo, scope, and affective style of fan engagement. The spotlight, once a passive symbol of attention, has become an active mechanism through which fandom is cultivated, regulated, and contested.

These shifting conditions of visibility, participation, and mediation prepare the ground for a more nuanced examination of the current dynamics within esports fan communities. As fan identities diversify and media infrastructures deepen their influence, it becomes necessary to interrogate how these communities function in practice—what tensions they contain, how loyalty is sustained or withdrawn, and how emotional labor circulates in their everyday interactions. It is to these questions that the following chapter now turns."

3 Current State of Esports "Fan Communities"

Fans and idols constitute the core of esports "fan communities", while media serves both as connector and amplifier. This section analyzes the present dynamics of these communities, drawing on Social Identity

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Theory, Parasocial Interaction, and Agenda-Setting perspectives to illuminate how loyalty, privacy, and personal branding interplay in today's LPL and KPL environments.

3.1 Rapid Emotional Shifts Among Fans

In the ecology of esports fan communities, emotional volatility is not an anomaly but a structural feature. The accelerated temporality of esports—frequent competitions, rapid patch updates, shifting player rosters—creates a climate in which fan attachments are continuously recalibrated. Within this environment, loyalty is rendered fragile, and fan identity becomes a site of constant negotiation. The phenomenon is particularly pronounced among adolescent fans, who form a substantial proportion of the esports audience and whose affective investments often mirror their developmental search for identity, belonging, and symbolic affirmation.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory offers one explanatory lens: fans are not passive recipients of content but active agents who seek media experiences that fulfill psychological and social needs. When a particular team or player fails to meet these evolving expectations—be it through poor performance, perceived attitude shifts, or insufficient interpersonal engagement—fans may withdraw their loyalty and realign with alternative figures or communities that better reflect their desired values. Yet beyond individual motivations, this fluidity is also culturally conditioned. In the contemporary Chinese context, digital fandom often functions less as a stable affiliation and more as a project of self-fashioning: the act of supporting an idol becomes a way to externalize one's aesthetic preferences, ethical convictions, or aspirational self-image.

Esports fandom, however, introduces a further complexity: the dual anchoring of identification in both the individual and the team. Unlike traditional sports where team loyalty tends to dominate, esports blurs this distinction due to its hybrid entertainment-sport nature and its emphasis on player personality as a core commodity. This results in a structural tension—what could be described as an "identity bifurcation"—in which fans may oscillate between collective identification with a club and affective allegiance to a singular player. When these two vectors align, fandom is reinforced; when they conflict, it fractures. A transfer, a benching decision, or even a public disagreement can trigger a crisis of alignment, pushing some fans into states of ambiguity or defection.

This is where the figure of the "anti-fan" emerges—a product not of disengagement, but of emotional overinvestment turned sour. Cultural theorist Matt Hills has noted that fandom is often marked by "intensity rather than consistency", and in esports this manifests in a readiness to flip emotional orientation when perceived betrayal occurs. The fan-to-anti-fan transition is thus less a rupture than a transformation within the same affective economy: the investment remains, but the object shifts from admiration to critique, from protection to attack. This dynamic is particularly visible on platforms like Weibo and Bilibili, where public discourse is shaped by momentary sentiment surges, often coordinated through comment flooding, hashtag mobilization, and tactical downvoting.

Moreover, platform architectures exacerbate this volatility. Recommendation algorithms prioritize trending topics and high-engagement content, creating echo chambers in which emotional reactions are amplified and rapidly circulated. In this context, fandom becomes performative: declarations of support or disillusionment are not merely personal sentiments but public acts that help shape the moral economy of the community. Fans are not only reacting to players or teams but also to each other, participating in a culture of affective competition where the strength and visibility of one's stance becomes a marker of authenticity.

These patterns reveal a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of esports fan culture: while community discourse often valorizes loyalty, the structural conditions of the ecosystem reward flexibility, speed, and emotional intensity. The result is a fan subjectivity that is simultaneously attached and restless, loyal and opportunistic, emotionally generous and strategically responsive. This tension does not weaken the fan community—it animates it. Yet it also raises questions about sustainability, mental health, and the limits of emotional labor in digital cultural economies.

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As we move into the next sections, it becomes increasingly important to understand not only the affective foundations of these communities, but also the tensions and contradictions that arise in their everyday operation. How these volatile attachments are managed, moderated, and sometimes exploited will be central to any discussion of the current governance dilemmas surrounding esports "fan communities".

3.2 Excessive Focus on Players' Private Lives

In the mediatized landscape of esports fandom, the boundary between public persona and private self becomes increasingly porous. Players, once known only by their virtual IDs and in-game avatars, are now subjected to a form of continuous visibility that extends far beyond the digital battlefield. Through livestreaming platforms, short-form video content, behind-the-scenes features, and social media updates, fans gain a curated yet affectively charged view into the daily lives of their idols. While this access is often framed as a gesture of intimacy and transparency, it also cultivates a voyeuristic culture in which the player is rendered as both performer and spectacle.

This phenomenon is symptomatic of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes as "liquid modernity", wherein social relationships are increasingly individualized, unstable, and mediated through screens. For many fans—especially those who struggle with sustained offline social connection—attachment to esports idols becomes a mode of compensatory intimacy. The fan does not simply follow the player's performance; they track mood fluctuations, sleeping patterns, family interactions, and romantic relationships. In this environment, emotional proximity is mistaken for entitlement, and spectatorship shades into surveillance.

The dual identity of esports players—as both competitive actors and quasi-celebrities—complicates their position within fan imaginaries. On the one hand, their symbolic legitimacy is derived from in-game prowess and tactical intelligence. On the other, their social capital is increasingly tied to how well they perform their "authentic self" off-stage. Livestreaming culture intensifies this tension: unlike traditional media appearances, livestreams are long, unscripted, and interactive, simulating a form of co-presence that blurs the distinction between public representation and private reality. In these spaces, players are expected not only to win games but to remain emotionally available, responsive, and charming. The performative self thus becomes a product of constant negotiation, subject to fan approval and algorithmic valuation alike.

However, the affective economy generated by this digital intimacy can turn pathological. When the symbolic proximity cultivated through screens is mistaken for real relational access, boundaries collapse. The emergence of "stalker fans"—who send unsolicited gifts, track real-world locations, or interfere with family members—illustrates the darker edges of fan attachment. While often dismissed as fringe behavior, these incidents are culturally symptomatic: they reveal how fan communities, in their quest for emotional fulfillment and symbolic possession, may reproduce forms of micro-surveillance, coercion, and control.

This is especially troubling given the demographic profile of many esports players. Entering the industry as teenagers, often without professional media training or long-term career planning, these players are highly visible yet structurally vulnerable. Their livelihoods depend not only on competitive success but also on the cultivation of a marketable persona, one that may require emotional openness at the cost of psychological stability. After retirement—often at a very young age—many struggle to transition out of the spotlight. Fan fixation, which once boosted visibility and monetization, becomes a burden when players no longer hold competitive relevance. Continued scrutiny into their personal lives, particularly involving relationships or family members, can lead to social anxiety, reputational damage, and in some cases, digital harassment.

From a cultural perspective, this phenomenon reflects a broader societal shift toward what Thomas Elsaesser has called "the politics of intimacy", where public life becomes saturated with private affect and identity is increasingly defined through mediated self-disclosure. Esports fandom, situated at the nexus of youth culture, entertainment, and digital labor, embodies this tension with particular intensity. The idol is no longer merely a figure of admiration but a mirror onto which fans project their own emotional needs, moral expectations, and social anxieties.

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In such a climate, the ethics of spectatorship must be re-evaluated. While fan engagement remains vital to the vitality of esports culture, the unregulated conflation of access with entitlement poses risks not only to individual players but to the long-term sustainability of fan communities. A healthier fandom requires more than enthusiasm; it demands structural awareness, emotional literacy, and a collective willingness to preserve the boundary between admiration and intrusion.

3.3 Media and "Fan Communities" Reinforce Personal Branding

The interplay between media logic and fan practices plays a central role in shaping the contemporary esports landscape. At the heart of this interplay lies the construction and reinforcement of personal branding, particularly through the figure of the MVP (Most Valuable Player)—a symbolic node where competitive performance, public recognition, and commercial interest converge. Unlike traditional team-based sports that often emphasize collective narratives, esports cultures are acutely attuned to the cultivation of individual brilliance. The MVP title, awarded after each match, becomes more than a performance metric; it functions as a narrative pivot around which both media attention and fan investment are organized.

These figures, often young, charismatic, and technically gifted, serve as vessels for multiple projections: they are not only carriers of in-game excellence but also sites of emotional investment, aspirational fantasy, and symbolic elevation. Media institutions, attuned to the affective rhythms of fan discourse, tend to amplify these figures disproportionately. Headlines, thumbnails, and highlight reels coalesce around a select few, turning their every action—both on and off the digital field—into content. The result is a skewed visibility economy, where the public image of a team is increasingly filtered through the personality of its most visible player.

Fan communities, for their part, do not passively absorb these narratives—they actively reproduce, modify, and circulate them. Through fan edits, gif sets, gameplay commentary, and social media amplification, supporters participate in the semiotic labor of idol construction. This aligns with what Henry Jenkins has described as "textual poaching", wherein fans appropriate and reshape media content to serve their own affective and ideological purposes. However, in the context of esports, this poaching often feeds back into the commercial apparatus itself: fan-made content increases traffic, enhances visibility metrics, and indirectly bolsters the marketability of the player.

The escalation of "opinion leaders" within these fan communities—whether in the form of influential microbloggers, streamer-commentators, or fan club organizers—further entrenches these branding dynamics. These figures often function as informal gatekeepers of collective sentiment, guiding fan interpretations and adjudicating reputational conflicts. They help shape dominant narratives about a player's skill, character, and worthiness of support, and in doing so, they can both stabilize and destabilize the internal hierarchy of the fan community.

What emerges is a complex cultural economy in which branding is not a top-down imposition but a collaboratively produced phenomenon. Yet this collaboration is not without tension. The intensification of idolization often leads to the formation of "blind worship" patterns—instances where critical distance is sacrificed for emotional affirmation. These patterns are exacerbated by the feedback loops between media framing and fan response: as media platforms highlight particular players, fan communities become more fervent in their support, prompting even greater media attention, and so on. In this recursive circuit, dissenting voices or critical evaluations of performance may be silenced, dismissed, or attacked, especially if they are perceived as threatening the idol's carefully curated image.

The risks of this dynamic are twofold. On the one hand, the disproportionate focus on individual players may marginalize team cohesion and undermine collective identity. On the other, the emotional pressure placed upon the idol—expected to perform not only with mechanical precision but also with moral perfection—creates a precarious and often unsustainable burden. The player is no longer simply competing; they are performing a role within an ever-expanding narrative economy, subject to expectations that extend far

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beyond their control.

In sum, the personal branding of esports idols is neither accidental nor incidental. It is the result of a convergent structure in which media strategies, fan desires, and platform incentives mutually reinforce one another. The figure of the idol thus becomes a product of collective labor—celebrated, commodified, and, at times, consumed. This dynamic raises urgent questions not only about fandom ethics and media responsibility, but also about how such branding processes might be regulated, negotiated, or contested within the broader governance of esports "fan communities". It is precisely to these questions that the following chapter now turns.

4 Governance of Esports "Fan Communities"

Based on the drivers and current conditions discussed, we propose the following targeted recommendations:.

4.1 Fans: Mitigating Alienation

The phenomenon of "fan community" alienation reflects deeper tensions at the heart of contemporary esports culture—tensions between emotional investment and rational distance, between participatory enthusiasm and behavioral excess. In a media ecology characterized by hyperconnectivity and algorithmic acceleration, the line between supportive fandom and toxic tribalism becomes increasingly difficult to draw. As fan identities are constructed, reinforced, and contested within highly volatile online environments, the governance of such communities emerges as not merely a technical issue, but a cultural and ethical imperative.

What was once an organic expression of admiration has, in many cases, been reconfigured into a system of affective labor organized around performance metrics, digital activism, and symbolic defense. Fan practices such as ranking manipulation, comment flooding, and mass reporting have become ritualized acts through which loyalty is both demonstrated and policed. The social architecture of these communities often mirrors that of a micro-polity, with "super fans" or "zhanjie" (stand-jies) functioning as informal authorities who coordinate fan operations, establish behavioral norms, and adjudicate internal conflicts. Their authority, however, is rarely formalized; it derives from charisma, visibility, and perceived ideological purity. As a result, fan spaces that claim to be inclusive and affectively driven frequently operate under implicit hierarchies and implicit codes of conduct—what Foucault might describe as "micro-physics of power", dispersed and embodied through everyday interactions rather than institutional decree.

These dynamics are further complicated by the demographic makeup of esports fan communities. The predominance of youth audiences—many of whom are navigating identity formation in tandem with digital immersion—renders these spaces particularly vulnerable to emotional volatility and discursive radicalization. The fluid boundary between the virtual and the real contributes to a kind of affective displacement: players and teams become repositories for feelings that may have little to do with the actual object of support. Escapism, in this sense, is not a retreat from reality but a restructuring of it, where online investment becomes the primary terrain of emotional validation. Under such conditions, criticism of idols is equated with personal affront, and disagreements within the community are interpreted not as differences in perspective but as betrayals of collective identity.

Addressing this alienation requires a shift from punitive models of governance to those grounded in cultural mediation and affective literacy. Institutional actors—esports clubs, tournament organizers, streaming platforms, and media accounts—must acknowledge their role not only as regulators but as meaning-makers within these communities. Rather than relying solely on content moderation or algorithmic suppression, they should engage in discursive interventions that foreground the values of mutual respect, reflective fandom, and emotional autonomy. Official accounts, for instance, might employ narrative strategies that decenter individual heroism and re-emphasize teamwork, sportsmanship, and personal growth, thereby disrupting

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the affective overconcentration on individual idols.

At the same time, governance must be wary of moralizing rhetoric that reduces fandom to pathology. Calls for "rational idol worship", while well-intentioned, often fail to address the structural conditions that drive emotional overinvestment—such as educational pressure, social atomization, and limited access to alternative identity-affirming spaces. As such, policy discourse should shift from regulating behavior to enabling more diverse forms of participation. Encouraging offline interest development, promoting fan-initiated charity projects, or facilitating educational collaborations between clubs and schools are all possible strategies that expand the emotional and social repertoire of fans beyond narrow idol-centered engagements.

Ultimately, the challenge of mitigating alienation within esports fan communities is inseparable from the broader question of how digital publics are formed, sustained, and made accountable. The governance of fandom is not simply a matter of behavioral correction—it is a project of cultural formation. It entails creating spaces where emotional intensity can be expressed without tipping into extremity, where identification can occur without erasing criticality, and where belonging does not demand obedience. As we move into the next chapter, which focuses on the governance of these complex and often contradictory fan communities, it is essential to consider how structures of power and meaning interact to shape what kinds of fandom are permitted to flourish—and at what cost.

4.2 Idols: Responsible Fan Guidance

Within esports "fan communities", idols—primarily professional players and the clubs that cultivate them—occupy a dual role as both aspirational figures and regulatory agents. Their symbolic presence extends beyond competitive performance, permeating the affective, discursive, and behavioral registers of fan life. While commercial logic often foregrounds players as brand ambassadors and content producers, the cultural implications of idolhood demand a more reflexive and ethically situated understanding of their influence. In this context, responsible fan guidance becomes not merely a moral expectation, but a structural necessity for sustaining a healthy and accountable fan ecology.

At the institutional level, esports clubs operate as commercial enterprises, deeply embedded in capital flows and media infrastructures. However, their function is not solely economic. As cultural producers, these organizations shape the norms, languages, and representational practices that govern fan engagement. One fundamental area where this responsibility becomes evident is the management of player identity. Given the increasingly blurred boundary between on-screen persona and off-screen subjectivity, the decision of how a player is named, framed, and circulated holds significant cultural weight. Prioritizing the use of virtual IDs in public-facing media—reserving legal names for contract-based or official purposes—not only preserves a symbolic distinction between the professional and the personal, but also helps to redirect fan attention toward the gameplay itself, rather than toward the player's intimate life. This subtle reframing may serve as an initial gesture toward de-escalating the emotionally intensive surveillance that characterizes idol-fan dynamics.

Yet symbolic management alone is insufficient. Players themselves, as visible and narrativized subjects, must recognize their role in shaping the emotional landscape of their communities. Their interactions with fans—whether through livestream banter, microblog posts, or short-form video content—carry a discursive weight that extends far beyond their original intent. In digital cultures marked by immediacy and hyper-responsiveness, even seemingly trivial remarks can catalyze waves of interpretation, emulation, or backlash. As such, the communicative practices of idols cannot be treated as purely private expression. They are embedded in what Sara Ahmed might term "affective economies", where emotions circulate not only between individuals but through symbolic figures who anchor community attachments.

For younger fans in particular—many of whom are navigating adolescence within the algorithmic architectures of fandom—players' language, tone, and attitude can function as tacit behavioral scripts. In environments where critical literacy is still forming, imitation becomes a central mode of relationality. An idol's

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moment of anger, sarcasm, or nonchalance may be replicated by fans as an expression of loyalty or alignment. This phenomenon reveals how idols do not merely "represent" excellence but actively participate in the informal disciplining of community norms. Therefore, guidance is not solely a matter of instruction but also of embodied modeling.

Clubs, as intermediaries between players and platforms, bear the responsibility of facilitating this process. Media training, content oversight, and values-oriented narrative framing must be integrated into the professional development of players—not as a constraint, but as an ethical practice. This is especially vital given the commercial incentive to amplify controversy, conflict, or hyper-personalization for the sake of attention and engagement. In resisting this tendency, clubs must adopt a long-term vision of community health, privileging stability and integrity over immediate visibility.

Furthermore, the governance of idol behavior must be context-sensitive. What counts as appropriate expression may vary across platforms, age groups, and cultural sub-communities. Instead of imposing uniform moral standards, clubs and players can cultivate a reflective posture—acknowledging the multiplicity of fan subjectivities while maintaining a commitment to care, clarity, and responsibility. In this sense, idolhood becomes a relational practice, structured not by perfection but by accountability.

Ultimately, the governance of fan communities cannot be decoupled from the conduct of idols. In the ecosystem of esports, where symbolic figures are imbued with emotional intensity and moral significance, responsibility does not lie solely in formal regulation. It resides in the everyday enactments of visibility, speech, and presence. As the next chapter will explore, the institutional management of media narratives and community discourse must be coordinated with these interpersonal dynamics in order to cultivate a fan culture that is not only passionate, but sustainable, respectful, and self-aware.

4.3 Policy Measures: Addressing "Fan Community" Misconduct

The increasing prominence of esports "fan communities" within digital public life has brought with it a corresponding intensification of behavioral excesses, particularly in the form of cyberbullying, defamation, and privacy violations. These actions, while often framed within the emotional logic of loyalty or moral correction, in fact reflect deeper systemic issues concerning digital subjectivity, platform governance, and the erosion of discursive ethics. When fan activity becomes weaponized—whether through targeted doxxing, orchestrated harassment, or internal purging of dissenting voices—it ceases to be an expression of participatory culture and becomes instead a symptom of structural breakdown within the digital public sphere.

Such behaviors are not isolated incidents, nor are they merely interpersonal conflicts. Rather, they emerge within a specific media infrastructure that rewards emotional intensity, accelerates visibility, and discourages nuance. In fan-driven ecosystems, the "right to speak" is often conflated with the "power to harm", particularly when group consensus is mistaken for moral legitimacy. What is frequently overlooked in these instances is how digital violence operates through affect—through rage masquerading as justice, or disappointment coded as accountability. These modes of expression are legitimized by the emotional economy of fandom itself, where proximity to the idol and devotion to the community are valorized, sometimes at the expense of ethical restraint.

The symbolic cost of such misconduct extends beyond the individual target. When fans attack idols for perceived disloyalty or when opposing fandoms engage in prolonged battles of humiliation, the space of collective meaning-making becomes fragmented. Online platforms, designed to facilitate engagement, often exacerbate these dynamics through algorithmic amplification: the more controversial, emotional, or polarizing the content, the more it is circulated. As a result, the public discourse space—already strained by commercialization and platform logic—becomes further saturated with conflict, reducing the possibility for rational negotiation or reflective dialogue. In such a climate, freedom of expression is frequently weaponized not as a tool for democratic participation, but as a cover for affective aggression.

While it is tempting to view these behaviors as a failure of individual moral restraint, doing so ignores the institutional vacuums that permit, and at times encourage, such conduct. The absence of clearly defined

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responsibilities among platforms, clubs, fan organizations, and public regulatory bodies allows for diffuse accountability and legal ambiguity. In many cases, platforms fail to intervene in time due to a reluctance to curtail user engagement. Clubs, focused on brand management and competitive outcomes, often adopt a reactive rather than preventive approach. And fans, emboldened by anonymity and affective solidarity, operate within a zone of cultural impunity, where regulatory norms are either underdeveloped or unenforced.

Addressing this multifaceted issue requires more than punitive regulation; it demands a recalibration of the cultural frameworks that structure online interaction. Legal measures are certainly necessary—particularly in defining the scope and severity of digital harassment, tightening enforcement mechanisms, and holding relevant parties accountable—but they must be accompanied by discursive interventions that reshape the affective infrastructure of fandom. Codes of conduct developed jointly by platforms, clubs, and civil society actors could serve to delineate acceptable behavior, not merely through prohibitions but through positive models of engagement. Educational initiatives, targeting young fans in particular, can introduce notions of digital citizenship that move beyond compliance and toward critical reflexivity.

Furthermore, regulatory efforts must be sensitive to the particularities of fan culture itself. Unlike other online communities, esports fandom is deeply entangled with emotional labor, symbolic projection, and identity performance. Governance strategies must therefore avoid treating fans as passive recipients of rules, and instead engage them as co-constructors of ethical discourse. Fan-led moderation teams, community charters, and cross-fandom dialogues could function as internal mechanisms of regulation, grounded not in external imposition but in shared cultural values. Such approaches resonate with Foucault's vision of governance not merely as external discipline, but as the shaping of conduct within frameworks of autonomy, recognition, and care.

In this sense, the challenge of regulating misconduct in esports "fan communities" is ultimately a question of cultivating a viable digital public. It is about building infrastructural conditions under which emotional investment does not collapse into aggression, and where plurality of voice can be sustained without eroding the community's ethical fabric. As we now move toward the concluding chapter, it becomes imperative to reflect on how these governance dilemmas intersect with broader questions of cultural responsibility, symbolic power, and the future of participatory culture in the esports era.

5 Conclusion

Esports "fan communities" emerge at the intersection of affective business investment, symbolic performance, and digital infrastructure, revealing a complex interplay between cultural production, platform logic, and the politics of identity. What initially appears as a youth-driven subcultural phenomenon—rooted in passion, solidarity, and participatory engagement—has, under the pressures of commercialization and algorithmic mediation, evolved into a space marked by volatility, polarization, and at times, aggression. The idol–fan relationship, once grounded in admiration and aspirational proximity, has become a site of emotional over-identification, symbolic struggle, and occasionally, behavioral transgression.

This study has traced the formation, current dynamics, and governance dilemmas of Chinese esports "fan communities" through a cultural research lens, foregrounding how emotion functions not as a secondary expression but as an infrastructural force that organizes participation, enforces norms, and shapes public discourse. In doing so, it has highlighted how fandom is no longer confined to entertainment peripheries but operates as a powerful social mechanism—capable of producing cohesion and conflict, meaning and manipulation.

The idolization of players, shaped through coordinated media framing and sustained by platform visibility economies, intensifies the moral and symbolic burden placed on individuals who are simultaneously athletes, performers, and public figures. Their visibility, while profitable, is also precarious—subject to fan projection, surveillance, and emotional volatility. Within such a system, players' self-presentation becomes both an economic imperative and a mode of governance, regulating fan behavior through modeling and af-

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fective cues. Clubs, in turn, are not mere capital investors but cultural intermediaries tasked with mediating between market interests and symbolic ethics.

Yet it is in the governance of fandom—especially in the face of misconduct—that the cultural tensions within this ecosystem become most apparent. Cyberbullying, doxxing, and internal fan purges are not simply behavioral deviations; they signal a deeper crisis in the ethics of participation and the limits of affective community. Emotional estrangement between fan communities and the broader public reflects the growing gap between insular digital subcultures and shared civic space. What begins as a retreat into fandom often ends in the reproduction of antagonism, moral absolutism, and symbolic violence.

To address these issues, a multilateral response is essential. Legal regulation must be fortified, but not in isolation; it must be accompanied by institutional reflexivity, platform accountability, and educational intervention. Players and clubs must acknowledge their symbolic power, and with it, the responsibility to shape public affect with care and clarity. Meanwhile, fans must be reimagined not as passive consumers or volatile mobs, but as active participants capable of self-regulation, mutual care, and cultural creativity. The goal is not to suppress affect, but to cultivate a more sustainable emotional ecology—one in which intensity is tempered by reflexivity, and loyalty is accompanied by critical distance.

In essence, the governance of esports "fan communities" cannot be reduced to behavioral control or technical fixes. It is a cultural project that requires the renegotiation of values, identities, and collective aspirations within the rapidly shifting terrain of digital life. As fan communities continue to expand and diversify, the future of esports fandom will depend on our ability to preserve its expressive vitality while confronting the emotional and ethical contradictions it generates. A healthier fan culture—rooted in dialogue, empathy, and shared responsibility—is not only desirable but necessary for the continued legitimacy and sustainability of esports as a cultural form.

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