

The Structural Limitations of Esports Player Idolization under the Algorithm-Fan Co-Creation Mechanism

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Abstract. In the platform-based media world, the public visibility of Esports players is increasingly formed by algorithmic recommendation systems and the practices of fans taking part. Although prior research has looked at the connection between algorithmic culture, platform-based communication, and esports improvement, a systematic review of the idolization mechanism co-built by algorithms and fans and its structural effect on the development of players' careers is lacking. This paper uses a systematic review method, incorporating relevant literature from algorithmic culture, participatory fan practices, digital star research, and Esports communication to analyze how the algorithm-fan co-construction mechanism impacts players' career visibility. The research shows that platform algorithms' preference for emotional expression and narrative readability results in the ongoing emotionalization and labeling of player images, reducing the role of competitive ability as the core assessment criterion. Meanwhile, as fan re-narration expands the space for cultural inclusion, it also deepens the solidification of player images and the instability of career progressions. So, this paper underlines the requirement to reflect on the joint effect of platform algorithms and fan participation in the context of communication structure and gives insights for platform governance and the esports industry activities.

Keywords: Esports Players, Algorithmic Culture, Platform-Based Communication, Idolization, Fan Participation

1. Introduction

In the contemporary platform-based media environment, "visibility" has gradually replaced traditional professional recognition, becoming a key mechanism for the distribution of cultural values and the organization of social attention. Communication studies have pointed out that recommendation algorithms on short video platforms and social media, through continuous evaluation of user interaction data, sort, filter, and amplify content, thus effectively participating in the production process of cultural meaning and social value [1]. Under this mechanism, being "seen" no longer depends solely on professional ability, institutional recognition, or long-term accumulation, but gradually on whether the content conforms to the platform's preferences for emotional intensity, narrative clarity, and dissemination efficiency [2]. This structural shift has had a particularly significant impact on cultural fields centered on performance evaluation. As a practice field that highly relies on competitive ability, tactical understanding, and tournament results, the

professional development of Esports players has long been shaped primarily by team systems, tournament regulations, and internal evaluation standards. However, with the large-scale entry of Esports content into short video platforms, its dissemination logic has gradually been incorporated into the platform-based visibility system [3]. Complete tournaments and professional analyses are broken down into several highly emotionally concentrated segments, and the player images are subsequently reorganized into more efficient narrative symbols. Against this backdrop, Esports players are gradually showing a trend of being "idolized." It should be emphasized that this idolization is different from the generation path of traditional sports stars and different from the personal brand management actively carried out by online content creators. Existing research shows that the public image of Esports players is often not dominated by the players themselves but gradually stabilized under the combined effect of platform algorithms and fan re-creation [4]. In other words, the idolization of Esports players is not an individual choice, but a structural result. Although existing studies have discussed this phenomenon from the perspectives of digital stars, participatory culture, and platform-based communication, the relevant discussions are mostly focused on the aspects of increased visibility, expansion of cultural influence, or fan economy, with insufficient attention paid to their potential limitations in career development. Especially in communication studies, Esports players are often regarded as a case of platform culture and are rarely placed within the framework of "career development" for systematic examination. Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the following question: When Esports players are continuously incorporated into the idolization mechanism co-constructed by algorithms and fans, what structural limitations will their career development face?

2. The impact of algorithm patterns on cultural visibility

2.1. The structural redistribution of algorithmic culture and visibility

In the platform-based media landscape, algorithms are no longer merely technical strategies of sorting the information and distributing the content, but they have slowly become prominent mechanisms of decisively interfering in the creation of cultural values and the formation of social significance. Connected studies note that the algorithm of recommendations based on the consistent processing of user-related data (likes, comments, reposts, time on page, etc.) has been used to recreate the heuristic knowledge of what type of content should be viewed, and the relative scarcity of visibility itself has been a resource distributed by the technical system [1,2]. Happening in this process, the algorithms themselves not only provide the power of the content distribution but also contribute to the creation of the cultural meaning and the social value.

This visibility distribution process is not a mechanism that works neutrally but is integrated into the business model and corporate logic of the platform. User retention, interaction efficiency, and advertising conversion are typically core outcomes of a platform, and therefore, the algorithms will enhance their content forms that can stimulate emotional response and encourage future interaction in the shortest amount of time [3]. Such a preference for structure results in more likely content to possess a strategic advantage in the recommendation system that has clear emotional expression, a tight narrative rhythm, and easy-to-understand content [5]. According to the cultural production, this process implies that the highly professional, complex, and contextual content frequently must be officially translated to enter the high-visibility channel. Whereas visibility is a natural outcome of the content quality/importance, it is now created by the screening mechanism, a product of the platform. It is within this structural framework that algorithms have slowly been turned into more than just an actor that operates behind the scenes to major actors with a cultural mediation role,

which creates a long-term and systematic effect on narrative style, expression, and even its value orientation.

2.2. Repositioning of the participatory culture theory in the algorithm governance

The theory of participatory culture first focused on the role of the audience in making culture because people can transcend a one-way communication model in traditional media by re-creating, re-disseminating, and making meaning of the culture. In this theory, relatively decentralized or poorly mediated communication is assumed, and participation is treated as a kind of cultural practice or subjective agency.

Along with the evolution of platform-based media environments, algorithmic recommendation has increasingly become the fundamental process of distributing content and allocating visibility [6]. Academicians have started considering the scope limits of the theory of participatory culture in algorithmic governance. Similar studies suggest that platforms will manage the filtered flow of information by ranking the information under algorithms, and with data feedback and rule design, they will inevitably incorporate elements of cultural participation into technological mediation and governance frameworks.

On this note, the researchers have theorized the participatory culture conceptually to encompass alternative views, including the notion of conditional participation and limited agency, in which participation is not pure but happens within the framework of the algorithmic logic of the platform and institutionalized approach [6,7]. This theoretical transformation does not reject agency; it views it as the outcome of being redefined through the application of algorithmic governance, which offers a fundamentally theoretical background for further analysis of the participation process in platform-based communication.

2.3. The knowledge gap of digital stars studies and the so-called involuntary idolization

The primary research topic in digital stardom is the way fame is created, sustained, and recreated in the infrastructure of platforms [8]. The current literature is predominantly preoccupied with the attention paid to content creators that can proactively promote their own brands, paying primary attention to the significance of emotional labor, relationship management, and ongoing exposure when it comes to being well-known [4]. It is generally assumed in this line of research that star status is the product of individual strategy and platform opportunity structure interaction.

With the process of platform-based communication increasingly entering various spheres of professional use, the academic community started paying sufficient attention to the fact that not everything that people strive to become public is because of an individual's aim to become famous. There are studies that have started to indicate that in professions where professional competence or performance is central, people can also be placed in the fame production machine of the platform without those individuals consciously following the path of becoming a star. This observation interrogates the analytical paradigm of the digital star studies based on initiative. In that regard, phenomena such as involuntary idolization may be regarded as analytical partners of the concept to explain how fame, because of structural processes, is annexed to professional practice. One important example in this theoretical debate is Esports players: they rely on their competitiveness to be recognized as a profession but cannot be escapist of platform-based visibility practices. Although the phenomenon has been mentioned in the existing research on an ad hoc basis, it has not yet received a systematic theoretical foundation.

3. Algorithm-fan co-creation mechanism for esports player idolization

In the platform-based media environment, the algorithm recommendation systems are profoundly entangled in the process of the distribution of the content and generation of meaning in a culture [1]. After the discussion earlier in the paper about the repositioning of platform algorithm logic and the participatory culture theory, the role of the synergistic effect of algorithm mechanisms and participatory practices in communication and the perception of the idol people in the Esports world as a process formed by platform technology structure and participatory practices of communication is within the scope of this section [2,3].

3.1. Recommendation of algorithms, emotion preferences, and visibility formation

Within the platform-based communication environment, recommendation systems are offerings of algorithms that can benefit some content types based on a continuous assessment of user interaction information [1,2]. In the case of Esports content, the benefits are usually reflected in the fact that the segments with obvious emotional overtones and a strict narrative pattern become prioritized.

This is a process that increasingly lends Esports content the nature of communication of the priority of emotion. The competitive actions played by the players, their playing decisions, and career-long performances are usually condensed into very symbolic moments, hence being the subject of later idolization accounts [8,9].

3.2. Fan re-narrative, symbolization, and image stabilization

The visibility structure framed through algorithmic recommendations does not showcase the performance of Esports players as a full process, but a sequence of events that pose high emotive saturation entering the dissemination process [3]. It is around these instances that fans, by editing, captioning, and emotionalizing, create moments of competition into units of activity which have a coherent meaning and thereby offer a recognizable and familiar structure onto the distribution of the image of the player [8].

This process of re-narration is conceivable as repositioning in the participatory culture phenomenon. Contrary to the previous beliefs that cultural participation can mark a comparatively autonomous practice of meaning production, within a platform-based media environment, such narrative practices are never without algorithmic system ranking and visibility distribution regimes [6,7]. Re-creation of fans is not an unformatted dynamic but is chosen and reinforced within the framework of the specified conditions of algorithmic preferences and platform regulations [6]. Thus, fan agency has not gone but has taken the form of a conditional participation which is determined by the technology set up [6,7].

In such circumstances, fans repeatedly appeal to emotional appeals and figurative images to condense and simplify the meaning of the images of the contestants, bringing them to a stable form of a few narrative tropes that are easy to transmit and identify. On the one hand, they sustain the sense of participation and right to interpret among the fans, and, on the other hand, become affirmed in the overarching image of the participants in a contest through regular amplification through algorithms [4,5]. Contestants, thus, are no longer perceived as affective and narratively consumed symbols that exist within the communication structure under the platform as repetitively consumed.

3.3. Data feedback, narrative convergence, and emotional governance

Emotion in the algorithm-fan co-construction mechanism is not merely a way of expression but becomes an item of the platform management gradually [2,3]. The recommendation systems, via changes to interactive information, assign premiums to certain types of emotions in dissemination, hence informing content creation and re-creation along a constrained pattern of narrative [1,2]. The norms are not fully followed to experience this emotional governance, but indirectly by a visibility reward mechanism.

During this process, competitors can no longer connect with the masses most of the time by competitive aptitude or professional execution, but are continually incorporated into a historical context of a focus on emotion. Applying it to Esports, the specified categories of emotions that can be determined and enhanced by algorithms include, e.g., tragic, passion, comeback, genius, etc., slowly making up the primary line of explanation of the image of a player [9].

By recurrent inflection and support of such emotional discourses, players become objects in the public, whose stable emotional orientations are formed, and their social effect is no longer a consequence of the competitive practice as such, but symbolic images, which can be emotionally recognized and projected [8]. In such a way, emotional government does not simply squeeze the display space of diversity of competitive practice, but also fully repeats the ongoing reproduction of the idolization of players at the structural level. It is no longer necessary that idolization is based on the explicit strategies of making stars, but is inherent in everyday communication mechanisms by means of selective promotion of emotions and narrative convergence through the algorithm [1,2].

4. Structural limitations of the idolization mechanism on the career development of esports players

The previous section analyzed how algorithm recommendations, fan re-narrative, and emotional governance jointly shape the idolization mechanism of Esports players. This chapter further points out that this mechanism not only affects the form of communication but also deeply intervenes in the career evaluation and development structure of players. As the image and professional value of players increasingly rely on emotional narratives and platform visibility allocation, idolization, while bringing short-term exposure, also gradually reveals structural limitations on career development [3].

Based on this, this chapter will analyze the long-term impact of the idolization mechanism on the career development of Esports players from four aspects: the weakening of professional evaluation standards, the limitation of career transformation by image labeling, the career risks brought about by unstable visibility, and the structural outsourcing of career risks.

4.1. Weakening of professional evaluation standards

In the idolization mechanism co-constructed by algorithms and fans, emotional communication has gradually become a key path to improve visibility. This process has invisibly weakened the status of competitive ability as the core evaluation standard. Although the professional legitimacy of Esports players is theoretically based on operational level, tactical understanding, and long-term competitive performance, in the platform-based communication environment, these professional elements are often difficult to present and identify in a high-frequency and intuitive form. Algorithm-based recommendation systems tend to amplify content segments with clear emotions and well-defined narratives, compressing a contestant's professional performance into a few symbolic moments. This

communication logic leads the public's understanding of a contestant's abilities to be increasingly based on emotional impressions and symbolic narratives, rather than a continuous assessment of their professional skills [3].

In the long run, the weight of competitive ability in public perception is relatively weakened, and a contestant's professional value depends more on whether they conform to the platform's communication logic. This change does not mean that professional ability itself is no longer important, but rather that its expression within the platform's visibility system is structurally restricted, thus affecting the stability and fairness of the professional evaluation system.

4.2. Image labeling and limited career transition

The image of Esports players has been slowly making itself intensely tagged under the incessant pressure of the emotional and narrative-based logic of communication. The fan re-narrative and the algorithmic amplification processes, together repeatedly, reinforce some emotional frameworks and the personality attributes, and eventually cement them in the dominant image of the player. Such labels assist in enhancing the recognizability of content and efficiency in dissemination, but decrease the complexity of the image of the player.

The effects of this labeling process are felt especially on the career development of the player in the long term. Since the career cycle is relatively short and the role a player performs is likely to change quite frequently in Esports, transitioning to becoming a competitive player, commentator, coach, streamer, or social figure may often be required by the player at various times [10,11]. Nevertheless, very consistent emotional categories may become structural barriers in the transition process, and it might be hard to make the public perceive or accept the player as a performer in other roles. "

Hence, although the idolization mechanism will make more people visible in the short run, it will reduce the diversity of players' career trajectories in the long run, undermining their place of identity adaptability and image redefinition at varying stages of career.

4.3. Visibility instability and unwarranted career risk

Platform visibility is not a linear, endless resource, but a data-oriented outcome, which is very much reliant on the allocation of algorithms and communicating with the user. This prominence is highly volatile and can be manipulated by any variable, like algorithm modifications, fluctuation in the interests of a user, or patronage. In the case of Esports players, this trait is further increased in their already short career lifespan.

Obvious fluctuations in the attention of players are common in the publicity of the players under the mechanism of idolization. As soon as the emotional story dies or the preferences of the algorithm shift, the players can lose their visibility and attention within a timeframe. This instability not only influences the business opportunities and sources of income of the players, but it also places consistent strain on their career planning and their psychological condition [11].

Research on the political economy of Esports also identifies structural vulnerabilities of Esports careers, which are largely reliant on the visibility of platforms and commercial ecosystems [10]. This means that the instability of juxtaposition is not predetermined by the personal power or lack of initiative, but by the natural nature of the platform-based communication system [3]. Such structural uncertainty only worsens the Esports career development risks, exposing players to a higher career insecurity in an extremely competitive setting.

4.4. Career risk structural outsourcing

Within the idolization mechanism, which is co-created by the algorithms with the fans, the platform oversees the allocation procedure of visibility with the mechanisms of recommending systems and data feedback, and, however, is not given equal responsibility for the career risks brought about [1,2]. These risks are normally passed to an individual level when the players experience career-related challenges because of diminished exposure, dependability of image, or breakdown of emotional discernment [3].

This form of risk outsourcing indicates the formalities of platform governance. The literature on platform governance has shown that information visibility on platforms is frequently regulated with an algorithmic system, whereas the platforms typically do not assume responsibility for the social implications produced by the systems [12,13]. The platform runs the system of algorithms behind the cover of a so-called neutral technology, but it has a profound effect on the career development journey of players with the help of the visibility reward system [2].

When the idolization mechanism is functioning effectively, the platform and the content ecosystem will co-benefit; when the mechanism is not functioning as it once did, or when the environment is transformed, individual players will suffer the two primary impacts [3]. Structurally, this risk distribution scheme exacerbates inequality in Esports career development. Although the platform is very relied upon by players, graphics do not guarantee much influence on the visibility mechanism [3,10]. This is an unequal relationship that forms one of the most basic career constraints of the platform-based idolization mechanism.

5. Implications: the structural significance of idolization mechanisms

5.1. Theoretical implications: turning from individual attribution to structural explanation

Considering the idolization mechanism and its professional consequences shown in the above, the theoretical point is that the explanation path of current research centered on individual strategies or cultural preferences needs to be adjusted. Future research should place more focus on the platform - based communication structure. It should study how algorithmic recommendation systems convert emotional and narrative content into significant mediators for professional evaluation by means of visibility allocation [1,3].

From this point, algorithmic culture research can expand the analysis object to the professional field centered on professional ability and performance, to study how algorithms reconstruct professional legitimacy and evaluation standards. In the meantime, participatory culture theory needs to be recalibrated in the algorithmic governance context. Look at cultural participation as an action under a platform structure, not presumed as a naturally rebellious practice [2,6].

This change in theory helps to more precisely explain the institutional bases of idolization in the platform - based environment.

5.2. Implications of platform governance: fortifying the scope of responsibility for algorithmic suggestions

Given the earlier - mentioned problems of visibility instability and outsourcing of professional risks, the implication from the platform governance level is that it must clarify the boundaries of responsibility for algorithmic recommendations in cultural production and professional development [2,3].

As algorithms function in a way like editorial choices, platforms should accept their influence on the allocation of professional chances, rather than completely blaming user preferences or data feedback for recommendation outcomes. Research on platform governance points out that algorithmic systems are playing an increasingly crucial role in structuring visibility and forming information hierarchies, which leads to questions about accountability and governance tasks [12,13].

In the field of esports, platforms can reduce the impact of emotional narrative failure on the professional development of individual players. They can do this by increasing the transparency of recommendation mechanisms, clarifying the ways content preferences change, or introducing buffering mechanisms. Platforms can enhance dissemination efficiency and minimize the structural transfer of professional risks to the individual level when they put algorithmic governance into a clearer normative framework.

5.3. Industry and career implications: reconstructing a career support mechanism beyond traffic

In response to the problem of idolization exacerbating career inequality, the industry and career implications are that it is necessary to reconstruct a career support and evaluation mechanism that is relatively independent of platform traffic [10].

Research on the political economy of Esports indicates that players' careers are often deeply embedded within platform-driven visibility and commercialization systems, which makes professional opportunities highly dependent on digital media infrastructures [10]. Esports industry stakeholders can therefore reduce their reliance on platform visibility during player evaluation, training, and transformation, and strengthen institutional recognition of long-term competitive performance, team contributions, and professional abilities.

Meanwhile, in terms of career transformation support, industry practices can help players cope with the limitations brought about by image labeling through systematic training and role transition design, expanding their space for identity reshaping at different career stages [11].

Through these structural adjustments, Esports career development is expected to gain a more stable and equitable institutional foundation in the platform-based communication environment.

6. Conclusion

The paper gives a methodical study of how algorithmic recommendation systems and participatory communication practices in platform - based media jointly fashion the idolization of Esports players and assesses the structural impact on their careers. The analysis implies that the algorithm - participatory co - construction visibility mechanism, when increasing players' public exposure, also changes the logic of career evaluation. Platforms' preference for emotional expression and readable narratives leads to the emotionalization and labeling of player images during dissemination. This undermines competitive ability as the key evaluation criterion and causes more instability in career paths.

To be more exact, the idolization of Esports players ought not to be regarded as a natural consequence of individual approaches or successful spread. Rather, it acts as a career - linked condition in the platform - based visibility configuration. Within this framework, players have limited say in their public profile and career journey. At the same time, algorithmic distribution and platform dissemination mechanisms increase and move professional risks to individuals.

Future research might adopt qualitative interviews, longitudinal analysis, or cross-platform comparisons to investigate how idolization mechanisms operate in different platform situations and

career periods, to improve the understanding of the connection between Esports career progress and platform governance.

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