

Platform Visibility Without Sport Legitimacy: Comment Frames Around Ultimate on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract. This article examines the presentation of Ultimate on Chinese social media through the visible comments on these platforms. Methodologically, this study is based on a qualitative content analysis of 180 visible top-level comments from 12 selected Douyin and WeChat Channels posts. The selected comments are treated as an observable public discourse corpus, not as representative evidence of broader Chinese public attitudes toward this sport. Among the collected comments, 63.3% contained stigma, mockery, or direct questioning of Ultimate as a sport. In contrast, 21.7% recognized the competitive value of the sport. The analysis found that mainstream athlete narratives generated more athletic recognition in visible comments. However, this type of exposure did not remove negative stereotypes. The findings suggest that visibility can help people notice the sport, but it can also connect the sport with existing jokes, football-field conflict, and the idea that it lacks real sport status. By comparing platform and content-type differences, the article shows why public-facing visibility should be treated as a field of interpretation rather than as automatic legitimacy.

Keywords: Ultimate, Social Media, Sport Legitimacy, Stigma, China

1. Introduction

As Ultimate has gradually gained attention in China through campus activities, clubs, and short videos, it raises an important question in sport communication: how do audiences outside the existing participant community understand the sport after they encounter it through digital platforms? This question matters not only because Ultimate appears more often in digital media, but also because different associations are formed around it during public exposure.

In the context of sports gaining attention through Douyin, Xiaohongshu, WeChat Channels, news platforms, and other media spaces, this study is not only about whether people watch Ultimate content. It is also about how emerging audiences understand the sport and what position they give it in Chinese society. For many popular sports, people often assume that public interest naturally leads to stronger legitimacy and cultural recognition. But for emerging sports, exposure may bring mixed reactions: entertainment, mockery, curiosity, and conflict. Sometimes an activity can become visible while its legitimacy remains unclear.

Therefore, this article does not mainly ask how Ultimate becomes popular in Chinese media. It asks how visible publics interpret the sport. The article focuses on how Ultimate is defined in visible

social media comments, especially through stigma, recognition of sport value, sport-identity doubt, and questions about legitimacy.

The article has three goals. First, it views emerging sport legitimacy as a cultural and communicative process, not simply as the result of popularity growth. Second, it shows that rule explanations and spectacular actions may not reduce existing bias toward Ultimate. Third, it points out that athlete narratives and account authority matter. Compared with isolated grassroots clips, mainstream athlete narratives gave similar sporting actions a clearer sport meaning and produced more athletic recognition in this corpus.

2. Framework

Legitimacy involves more than visibility or formal presence. An emerging sport may be treated as a marginal activity, a lifestyle decoration, a misuse of public space, or not even a "real" sport. Suchman describes pragmatic legitimacy as usefulness, moral legitimacy as value approval, and cognitive legitimacy as whether something is taken for granted [1]. In China, Ultimate has had disputes over shared public space, but it also seeks legitimacy through mixed-gender participation, Spirit of the Game, and its own competitive culture [2-4]. These features matter to participants, but they do not guarantee positive responses from people outside the sport community.

Framing and mediatization help explain why visibility cannot solve this problem by itself. Entman defines framing as selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality [5]. Billings and Hardin and Ličen et al. show how sport is presented, consumed, and discussed through media [6, 7]. For an emerging sport, being accessible to a broader Chinese audience does not mean that its meaning becomes settled. Platform visibility can bring Ultimate outside its core circle, but it cannot make everyone read it in the same way.

This analysis treats comments as visible discourse. The comments are used to trace stigma, mockery, and denial of sport legitimacy, but they are not treated as legal cases of online hate. This approach follows research on online sport discourse, which shows that comments can include ridicule, exclusion, in-group and out-group division, and sometimes more serious harassment [8].

Short videos are especially likely to create legibility problems. A diving catch in Ultimate may look like athletic skill to one viewer, but another viewer may read it as leisure entertainment, a dog-related joke, a football-field conflict, or lifestyle content. Visual fragments often fail to show what is behind the sport: team movement, defense, timing, tournament stakes, self-officiation, and Spirit of the Game. Therefore, the same physical action can carry different meanings depending on who posts it, what explanation is attached, what the audience already knows, and how the platform circulates the content.

For this reason, account authority and content mechanism are important. A mainstream athlete story gives different cues from a grassroots highlight, a rules tutorial, a celebrity lifestyle post, or a campus activity post. These accounts and formats give audiences different ways to read Ultimate: as high-level competition, personal entertainment, a social activity, part of university life, or a challenge to local sport space. Still, the analysis does not assume that a platform or an account can control what all viewers think. The point is that different content forms make certain interpretations easier than others.

3. Methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis of visible top-level comments. Because the sample is small, it uses purposive rather than statistical sampling. The 12 posts are treated as a high-visibility

and out-of- community sample: taken together, they had relatively strong visible engagement, especially likes and other platform interaction indicators, and they circulated beyond a narrow Ultimate fan group. In this sense, they can represent the kind of public-facing Ultimate content this article examines, although they do not represent all online discussion of the sport. Public comments are treated as platform discourse shaped by the original post, account identity, interface functions, comment order, recurring ridicule patterns, and common interaction patterns. The method is interpretive and descriptive, so the analysis does not infer the attitudes or causal behavior of the whole population from platform comments.

Twelve posts were selected because Ultimate was central to the content and because they had visible reach beyond a narrow Ultimate fan group. Selection considered the posts' overall visibility and engagement, especially relatively high likes, together with views, comments, shares, account identity, and whether the post had moved beyond specialist Ultimate audiences. The search used Chinese platform searches on Douyin and WeChat Channels with terms related to Ultimate, flying disc, Ultimate competition, and Ultimate rules. Six posts were selected from Douyin and six from WeChat Channels. The sample was designed to compare different types of content, including grassroots game videos, rule or technique education, mainstream athlete stories, celebrity or lifestyle exposure, campus organization, and official event reports. These posts should not be treated as the most influential Ultimate videos in China. They are a purposive corpus chosen to study how Ultimate is framed when it enters broader platform spaces.

For each selected post, 15 valid top-level comments were collected, producing 180 comments in total. The comments followed the platform's visible display order. Advertisements, duplicate comments, creator self- comments, pure emoji entries, and comments without understandable text were excluded. If one of these appeared within the first 15 visible positions, the next valid comment was collected until the post had 15 usable comments.

Each comment was coded with one main category that reflected its most obvious interpretation of the sport.

Table 1. Analysis summary for the coding categories used

Code	Category	Coding rule
1	Athletic recognition	Praises skill, strength, effort, technique, strategy, competitive level, or general sport value.
2	Sport-identity doubt	Challenges or weakens the idea that Ultimate is a real sport.
3	Stigma or mockery	Uses dog comparisons, jokes, satire, or comments that belittle participants or the sport.
4	Social or lifestyle frame	Treats Ultimate as cool, healthy, social, or linked to a certain lifestyle group.
5	Participation curiosity	Asks how, when, or where to start playing.
6	Event, club, or career pathway	Mentions organized competition, local teams, clubs, training, athlete development, or work opportunities.
7	Commercial or brand signal	Connects Ultimate with products, services, brands, or commercial activity.
8	Neutral or other	Has no clear frame or cannot be classified into the other categories.

The analysis also recorded comments that worked as pathway signals. These comments moved beyond immediate reaction and connected the content to participation, organized events, teams, elite athletes, employment, consumption, or repeated involvement. The analysis followed two stages. First, each comment was coded for its dominant frame. Second, posts were grouped by content

mechanism, so the study could compare how different types of posts were linked to athletic recognition and negative legitimacy frames. The unit of analysis is the visible comment frame, not the private motive of an individual user.

Several limits need to be clear. The sample is purposive and small. Platform comment order is not random and may be shaped by popularity, recency, controversy, and user-specific recommendation. The comparison between Douyin and WeChat Channels is useful inside this corpus, but it cannot be extended to all users of either platform. Because this conference paper does not include a formal appendix, not every sampling detail, coding decision, or post-level distribution can be shown in full.

4. Findings

In this corpus, visibility did not mainly produce a sporting interpretation of the activity. Of the 180 comments, 104 were coded as stigma or mockery. Another 10 comments expressed sport-identity doubt. Together, these negative legitimacy frames made up 63.3% of the comments. Athletic recognition appeared in 39 comments, or 21.7%. Another 9 comments, or 5.0%, showed pathway signals such as interest in participation, events, clubs, sport brands, consumption, or connection with athletes and professionals. These figures describe only the selected comment corpus. They do not represent broader Chinese public opinion.

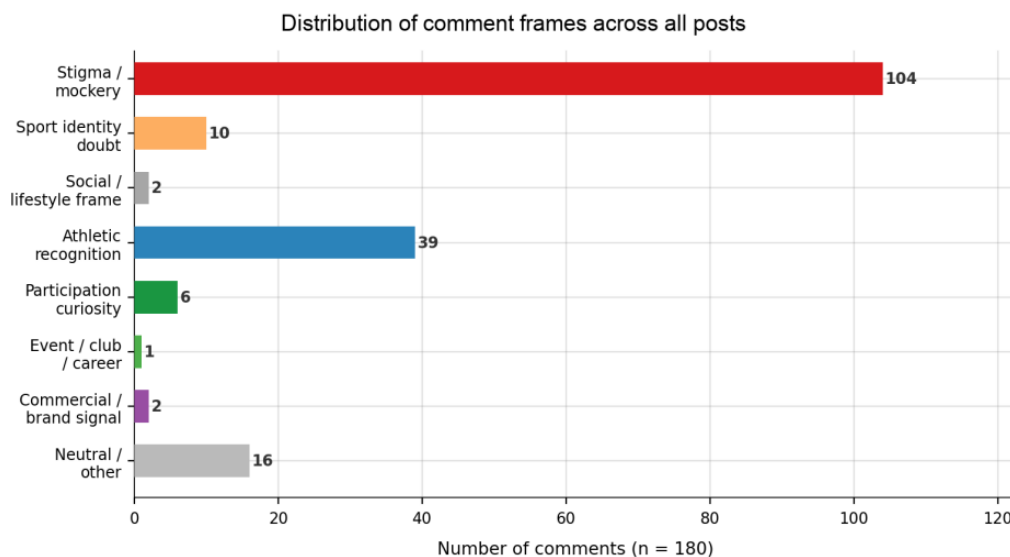


Figure 1. Distribution of primary comment frames across all selected posts (n = 180)

The platform samples differed, but this comparison should be read only as an internal corpus comparison. In the selected Douyin comments, 64 of 90 comments were negative legitimacy frames (71.1%), while 10 comments expressed athletic recognition (11.1%). In the selected WeChat Channels comments, 50 of 90 comments were negative legitimacy frames (55.6%), while 29 comments expressed athletic recognition (32.2%). This difference may come from the account types and narrative structures in the sample. For example, the WeChat Channels sample included a mainstream athlete narrative, while the Douyin sample included more grassroots creator posts, celebrity exposure, and lifestyle content. The data cannot support a general claim that one platform user group is more supportive or more hostile than another.

The clearest contrast appeared across content types. Mainstream athlete narratives produced 18 athletic- recognition comments out of 30, although they still included 10 negative comments.

Grassroots competitive creator posts produced only 3 athletic-recognition comments out of 45, while 35 comments were negative legitimacy frames (77.8%). Rules and technique education were also closely linked to ridicule: among 45 comments, 32 were negative and only 5 recognized the activity as sport. Basic instruction can help beginners, but it does not automatically convince viewers who already reject the sport.

Table 2. Key descriptive results from the selected comment corpus

Group	n	Negative legitimacy	Athletic recognition
All selected comments	180	114 (63.3%)	39 (21.7%)
Douyin	90	64 (71.1%)	10 (11.1%)
WeChat Channels	90	50 (55.6%)	29 (32.2%)
Grassroots competitive creator	45	35 (77.8%)	3 (6.7%)
Rules/technique education	45	32 (71.1%)	5 (11.1%)
Mainstream athlete narrative	30	10 (33.3%)	18 (60.0%)

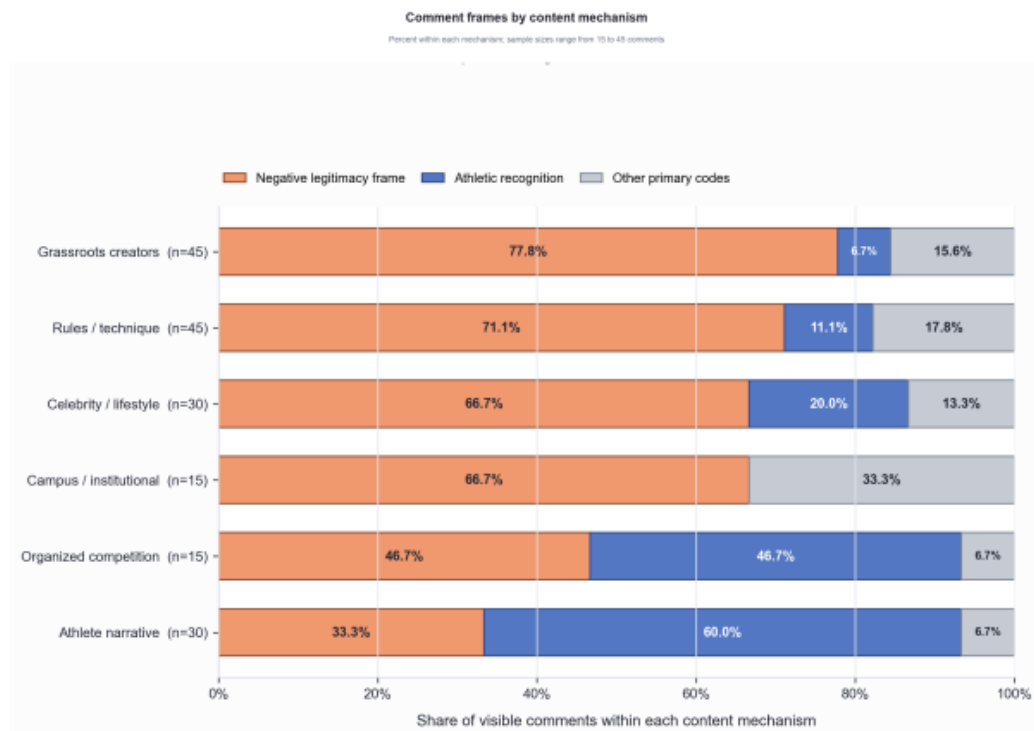


Figure 2. Comment frames by content mechanism; percentages are within each mechanism

The small number of pathway signals matters because it separates visibility from further action. The data cannot show whether a viewer later became a participant. It also cannot prove that social media failed to recruit people. It only shows that, in these visible comments, open statements about participation, events, clubs, career pathways, or consumption were rare.

Dog comparisons were the most portable form of stigma. Comments such as "Is this for dogs?" or "good dog" reduced athletic movement to a familiar pet routine. Another common negative frame involved football-field conflict. Some comments suggested that Ultimate players were taking over space that should belong to football players. These comments were not only about disliking a sport. They were also about who has the right to use public sport space.

Mainstream athlete narratives gave viewers a clearer vocabulary of effort, dedication, and sport identity. Some comments praised teamwork, defensive intensity, or competitive quality. By contrast, isolated competitive clips and rule explanations were easier for commenters to detach from the sport context. The movement could be impressive, but without a clear athlete story, tournament setting, or consequence, many viewers still read it as a joke or lifestyle content.

Celebrity and lifestyle posts also had limits. A well-known person can bring exposure to Ultimate, but that does not automatically turn the activity into a recognized sport. Campus or institutional association also did not guarantee legitimacy. A university may give prestige to an activity, but the activity still needs convincing sport cues, such as competition, athletes, rules, and stakes. In this corpus, the findings support three bounded claims: stigma is not only caused by missing rule information; physical action does not carry stable meaning across different contexts; and mainstream athlete narratives can increase athletic recognition, but they do not remove stigma completely.

Campus sport accounts are important because they challenge the simple idea that institutional status automatically transfers to the activity itself. A university can provide authority, but it cannot make audiences recognize a sport by association alone. The campus example suggests that prestige works better when it is connected to competitive elements, athlete stories, and a clear frame that explains why the activity should be read as sport.

5. Discussion

This research does not argue against social media communication. In the selected examples, visibility made Ultimate more publicly available, but it worked more as an input into meaning-making than as a fixed result. Many visible comments repeated existing jokes or arguments. Positive comments often focused on a specific action rather than on the sport as a whole, including its rules, athletes, and stakes.

Rules and instructional language show that stigma is not only a lack of information. Even with rules and clear explanations, some viewers still treated the sport with contempt. More facts do not automatically make an activity accepted as a sport. Sport value becomes easier to recognize when familiar athletes, clear stakes, real competition, and meaningful results are placed around the action. Through well-known athletes and authoritative information, viewers can read what happens on screen as pressure, effort, and achievement. Clips without that context often remain open to jokes or lifestyle teasing.

Football-field conflict also shows that legitimacy is not only about liking or disliking a post. Some comments involve physical space, sport hierarchy, and symbolic exclusion. This is why the article treats comment discourse as part of a broader problem of sport legitimacy rather than only a set of personal opinions.

The communication implication is modest. Account holders cannot fully control comment talk, but they are not powerless. The sportness of a new sport becomes easier to recognize when a post gives clearer context: who the athletes are, what the event is, what the goal is, and why the result matters. Rule learning is still useful, but it is only one part of legitimacy. When Ultimate moves beyond its core followers, rules alone cannot fully explain why the sport should be recognized.

This study also has limits. Comments are public expressions, not private beliefs or offline behavior. They do not represent the whole participant group or the whole Chinese public. Future research could use a wider and more diverse sample across platforms, while protecting privacy, and could connect comment discourse with actual outcomes such as participation, event viewing, club joining, or purchase decisions.

6. Conclusion

Ultimate's visibility in China shows that being seen is not the same as being recognized. In this purposive corpus, negative legitimacy frames appeared more often than athletic recognition, although mainstream athlete narratives made sport recognition more available. The main point is simple: if Ultimate is presented only as something visible, audiences may still interpret it through jokes, lifestyle frames, or field conflict. If it is presented with athletes, competition, stakes, and context, it becomes easier for audiences to understand it as sport.

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