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Fandom of Celebrities and Esports: A Comparative Study of Fan Behaviors and Participation

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Abstract. With the rapid development of mobile internet and social media, fan culture is no longer a niche subculture, but a common mass-cultural phenomenon online. Apart from the well-known celebrity fandom in the entertainment industry, professional esports leagues such as KPL have given rise to a new fan group called "esports-chasing fans". This paper takes celebrity fandom and KPL esports-chasing fans as research subjects. Celebrity fandom refers to fans of entertainment idols, and "esports-chasing" means followers of KPL esports matches. It sorts out how these two fan communities come into being, and makes comparisons from community operation, fan consumption and group conflicts. It analyzes how the idol entertainment industry and competitive events influence fan thoughts and behaviors respectively. Nevertheless, large amounts of capital and traffic have flowed into the esports circle. This paper mainly relies on existing literature and publicly-available online materials, without questionnaires or interviews. Future research may collect first-hand survey data to better understand the psychological changes of esports-chasing fans. It also hopes to offer more objective insights into these two kinds of online fan cultures.

Keywords: Fan culture, celebrity fandom, esports-chasing, esports events, online communities

1. Introduction

In recent years, mobile internet and social media have developed fast. Fan culture has broken away from small-scale subculture and become a widespread mass-cultural phenomenon on the internet [1]. Most previous studies on fan culture focused on celebrity fandom. Many scholars have explored fan support activities, chart-boosting, online fan conflicts and how capital reshapes fan mindsets [2]. As China's esports industry expands rapidly, the KPL (King Pro League) has attracted huge audiences. Accordingly, the new group of "esports-chasing fans" has drawn public attention [3].

Superficially, esports-chasing fans and celebrity fans behave in much the same way. They assemble on social platforms, speak up for their favorites, devote time and money, and frequently engage in online disputes. Despite similar surface behaviors, their internal logics differ significantly [4].

Academic research on celebrity fandom is relatively sufficient. Existing papers discuss the operation of idol industries, fans' emotional labor and online community contradictions [5]. By

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contrast, studies targeting esports-chasing fans are far fewer. Most relevant literature discusses esports fans separately, while comparative analyses between celebrity fandom and esports-chasing are limited [6]. Many ordinary internet users equate esports-chasing fans directly with celebrity fans, ignoring special rules brought by competitive matches. Such oversimplified views may cause misunderstandings toward these two fan cultures [7].

Therefore, this paper places celebrity fandom and esports-chasing fans within one analytical framework. It compares community operation modes, consumption behaviors and group conflicts, explores how idol-industry logics and competition logics affect fan thoughts and actions, and reflects on realistic problems of fan culture under digital networks. It aims to help people understand these two online fan groups more objectively [8].

2. Background for the formation of celebrity-chasing and esports-chasing communities

2.1. Celebrity-chasing fandom

The formation of celebrity-chasing fandom largely depends on the mature entertainment idol industry. The idol industry has complete procedures for talent selection, training, packaging and promotion to produce market-oriented idols in batches [2]. Idols attract audiences not necessarily through outstanding professional competence, but often through public personas, appearance and personalities. Agencies release daily content of idols via Weibo and short-video platforms to narrow the distance between idols and netizens. Gradually, fan communities come into shape [5].

Within this idol industry, fans occupy an important position. Agencies need fan-generated data, consumption volume and online popularity to prove idols' commercial value. Various fan support activities become criteria for evaluating idols' market worth [9]. Fandom communities cannot maintain order spontaneously. Formal fan organizations including official support clubs, data-tracking teams and anti-rumor teams emerge with clear division of labor. Influential senior fans set community norms and organize ordinary fans to do chart-boosting, comment-controlling and fund-raising [2]. Fandom activity surges when idols release new works or participate in variety shows. However, such communities are highly tied to individual idols. Once idols get involved in scandals or terminate agency contracts, fan communities may collapse and many fans will quit [10].

2.2. Esports-chasing communities

Professional esports events lay the foundation for esports-chasing communities, among which KPL is the most typical domestic example [3]. The esports industry has built a complete league system with fixed schedules, teams and professional players. Match outcomes are determined by players' skills and team cooperation. Most esports-chasing fans were game players at first. They get attracted by players' competence and on-site performance while playing or watching games, and then form fan communities [6].

Different from celebrity-chasing fandom, esports-chasing communities rely mainly on the whole event system rather than single players. Even if players transfer or retire, leagues keep running and most communities can survive [3]. Esports fans create secondary-creative works and hold online discussions. There exist small spontaneous fan groups, yet their binding force over fans is weaker than that in celebrity fandom [7]. Esports-chasing fans have diverse objects of affection: some follow individual players, some support whole teams, and others only watch matches casually. Community discussion heat peaks in regular seasons, playoffs and finals, and drops greatly during off-seasons without matches [4].

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The esports industry has learned commercial promotion models from the entertainment circle. Players build personal personas and receive numerous commercial endorsements. As a result, fandom-style phenomena appear within esports-chasing communities. Even so, match results remain the core evaluation standard for esports-chasing [6].

3. Comparative analysis on operation modes of two fan communities

3.1. Community organizational structures

Celebrity-chasing fandom has obvious hierarchical structures. Official fan support clubs sit at the core, with subordinate subgroups for support activities, data collection, rumor resistance and graphic design [2]. Senior influential fans hold most discourse power, set community rules and guide ordinary fans to take part in various activities. Ordinary fans mostly follow arrangements from senior fans. Great public-opinion pressure exists within communities; people holding different opinions may be criticized by other fans [9]. Information flows downward from senior fans to ordinary members. Community cohesion heavily depends on individual idols [5].

Although esports-chasing communities also have influential fan bloggers, their overall organizational level is much lower [3]. There are hardly large official fan organizations that can enforce rules on all members, and fan opinions are more scattered. Within one comment section, player-only fans, team supporters and casual spectators often debate with one another [7]. No unified speech standard is forced on participants, so fans can express diverse viewpoints. Influential esports bloggers cannot fully control online public opinions. When players transfer among teams, communities will not disappear completely; only fan stances shift to some extent [6].

3.2. Emotional attachments within communities

Celebrity-chasing fans project their emotions onto idols. Their affection comes partly from idols' personas and charm, and partly from idealized images imagined by fans themselves [2]. Fans project real-life expectations onto idols for emotional satisfaction. Private lives and daily updates of idols draw far more attention than their stage performances or artistic works sometimes [10]. Fans count on idols for emotional comfort and expect idols to keep perfect public images. Once idols' real-world behaviors break such imagination, fans may suffer heavy emotional blows and choose to stop supporting them [5].

Esports-chasing fans' emotions are mostly driven by on-field match performances [3]. Their joy or anger largely follows match results. Brilliant individual plays or dramatic come-from-behind victories can excite fans greatly [4]. Some fans admire players' personalities, but such fondness is usually premised on good in-game performance. Even players with pleasant personalities will be questioned if they keep performing poorly. Match outcomes are objective facts, which distinguishes esports from idol culture lacking unified evaluation criteria [6]. Nevertheless, as commercial packaging enters esports, some esports-chasing fans over-emphasize players' personas while ignoring competitive strength. This represents the fandom-oriented transformation of esports-chasing [7].

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4. Comparative analysis on fan consumption behaviors

4.1. Main consumption categories

Celebrity-chasing fans' consumption falls into several types. The first is content consumption: buying albums, digital singles, concert tickets and idol-starred films or TV series. The second is fan-support consumption: funding outdoor advertisements, gift donations and bulk-purchasing goods to boost data. The third is purchasing products endorsed by idols [2]. Very often fans buy these items not out of personal needs, but to raise idols' data and commercial value. Under community atmosphere, spending amount becomes a measurement of devotion to idols, which gives rise to irrational consumption. Some student fans without stable income even spend money beyond their affordability [9].

Esports-chasing fans also generate various consumption. Basic consumption includes match tickets, game skins and event-related merchandise. Some fans send gifts in players' live-stream rooms. Endorsed products of players and teams also drive fan consumption [3]. Part of esports-chasing consumption stems from genuine love for games and competitions; part aims to support players or teams [4]. Compared with celebrity fandom, large-scale fund-raising for data-boosting is less common among esports-chasing fans. Still, irrational consumption exists. As fandom-style influences spread, fund-raising and expensive gift-giving are seen more frequently in esports circles [6].

4.2. Driving logics behind consumption

Celebrity-chasing consumption is mainly pushed forward by the idol industry. Agencies and brands take advantage of community atmosphere to spread the idea of "spending for love", making fans believe consumption equals support for idols [2]. Consumption turns into a symbol of fan loyalty. Money spent is converted into commercial data to demonstrate idols' market appeal. Many consumption activities gain their meaning inside fan circles, while practical quality of commodities becomes secondary [5].

Esports-chasing consumption is rooted in competitive logics. Fans spend money largely to support events and recognize players' gaming competence [3]. People buy live-match tickets to watch real competitions and purchase merchandise out of fondness for teams and games [4]. However, capital keeps penetrating esports. Endorsement business and traffic-oriented operations grow, and traffic logics squeeze original competitive logics. This complicates esports-chasing fans' consumption motivations, and some consumption behaviors start to resemble those in celebrity fandom [7].

5. Comparative analysis on group conflicts

5.1. Triggers of conflicts

Conflicts in celebrity fandom mostly revolve around idols. Fans of different celebrities quarrel and attack one another over resource competition, ranking comparisons and rumor-spreading [2]. Conflicts also emerge inside one fandom, for instance when fans dislike idols' cooperation partners or hold divided viewpoints. Many fandom disputes have no objective standards for judging right or wrong. Arguments center on stances and personas and may easily lead to personal abuse [10].

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Some conflicts in esports-chasing communities are triggered by match results. After defeats, fans argue over players' performance and coaches' tactics [3]. Fans of rival teams confront each other online because of on-field competition relationships. Apart from match-related factors, players' private affairs, transfer disputes and online rumors can also cause fan conflicts [6]. One feature of esports-chasing disputes is that participants often cite match statistics and game replays as evidence. Yet under growing fandom-style influences, increasing quarrels have nothing to do with matches and turn into pure personal attacks between fans, similar to conflicts in celebrity fandom [7].

5.2. Manifestations and consequences of conflicts

Conflicts in celebrity fandom include comment-controlling, mass reporting and rumor-mongering. In severe cases, doxxing and other harmful behaviors occur [2]. Conflicts spread rapidly across internet platforms. Fans tend to adopt black-and-white thinking and refuse opposite viewpoints once they take sides. Large-scale fan fights pollute online environments and may trigger negative social incidents [9].

Conflicts among esports-chasing fans usually appear as fierce arguments in forums and comment sections, clipped misleading video clips and offensive verbal abuse [3]. Without heavy fandom-style influence, many conflicts fade away after seasons end. Once fandom-oriented transformation deepens, esports-chasing conflicts will escalate into malicious reporting and online bullying. Both types of fan conflicts show that the internet amplifies public emotions, and echo-chamber effects within communities further intensify group opposition [8].

6. Discussion and reflection

Both celebrity-chasing fandom and esports-chasing communities are fan subcultures developed from digital networks. They share similarities in community forms, fan consumption and online conflicts, yet their underlying operating logics are essentially different [1, 2]. Dominated by the idol industry, celebrity-chasing fandom applies subjective evaluation standards with idols' personas as emotional cores [5]. Esports-chasing communities are built upon competitive events, and match results provide objective evaluation references [6].

Now traffic-oriented capital keeps entering esports, and fandom-style phenomena become prominent. Players are packaged like idols, fan support activities are organized, and fan attacks happen more often. This partly explains why the public frequently confuses esports-chasing with celebrity-chasing [7]. Esports-chasing should not be equated directly with celebrity fandom, while existing problematic fandom-like practices within esports-chasing should also be recognized [4].

Both fan groups suffer from irrational consumption, online quarrels and extreme emotions. Social-media algorithms strengthen group boundaries and trap fans inside information cocoons. Capital exploits fan emotions and brings financial and mental burdens to fans [10]. Fan culture should not be categorically rejected. It also has positive values: people make friends, create secondary works and obtain group sense of belonging within communities [8].

To promote healthy fan culture, platforms need to strengthen supervision and restrict excessive capital exploitation of fans. Meanwhile, fans shall be guided to build rational attitudes, invest time and money moderately and reduce online extreme behaviors [9].

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7. Conclusion

This paper selects celebrity-chasing fandom and KPL-related esports-chasing fan communities as research objects. Comparisons are carried out from community origins, community operations, consumption behaviors and group conflicts. Celebrity-chasing fandom originates from the entertainment idol industry, takes idols' personas as emotional core and has tight-knit organizations. Fan behaviors are largely shaped by traffic-driven commercial logics. Esports-chasing communities are rooted in professional esports events, with match results as core evaluation criteria and relatively loose organizations. Capital-driven traffic interventions in esports push forward fandom-oriented transformation of esports-chasing, blurring behavioral boundaries between the two fan cultures.

Digital media reshape modern fan behaviors. Fans gain emotional sense of belonging in communities, while facing risks including group extremism and irrational consumption. This research has limitations. It is based merely on existing literature and public online observations, without questionnaire surveys or interviews for first-hand data. Follow-up studies may collect primary-hand data to further analyze psychological changes of esports-chasing fans. It is hoped that this paper can help distinguish celebrity-chasing fandom and esports-chasing, and offer modest references for understanding contemporary online subcultures.

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