

# *Fangirl or Qualified Fan: Identity Construction of Female Chinese Soccer Fans*

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**Abstract:** Research on sports fans has increased in line with China's ambition to become a leading sports nation. However, studies regarding female Chinese soccer fans are still insufficient. Based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese female soccer fans and cyber ethnography, findings suggest that apart from similar identity construction practices to male fans, female fans show typical motivations and behaviors in the establishment of fan identity. This is mainly about emphasis and display of emotions, which reflect traits of female gender roles. Because of the social expectation that women play an expressive role when female fans enter the soccer field, which is dominated by instrumentality and masculinity, they may face mild or severe rejection. As a result, their identity as soccer fans may also be threatened. The study concludes that female fans are able to construct their identity in unique ways and that their criteria for becoming "qualified fans" are influenced by internalized gender role norms.

**Keywords:** fandom, female soccer fans, identity construction, gender role

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, China has actively promoted the construction of a leading sporting nation, with soccer fans playing a vital role in promoting sports culture and advancing the professionalization of soccer, including creating industrial value [1]. Soccer fans hold significant research value in promoting the development of mass sports.

The "2019 China Soccer Viewer White Paper" by iResearch Company reports that the soccer fan base in China is nearly 200 million, with a male-to-female fan ratio of approximately 7:3 on the sports media platform [2]. While female fans constitute a smaller proportion of total soccer fans, their overall number is significant due to the massive fan base. Furthermore, as women have witnessed a gradual increase in their influence in consumption and other domains in recent years, the significance of studying female fans is not limited to the sports world alone.

While Chinese research on soccer fans is abundant, there is still a dearth of studies focused on female sports enthusiasts. Moreover, the majority of these few studies analyze the behavior of female fans from a perspective about "sex" (e.g., sexual revolution), whereby women's interest in sports is often perceived as a means of attaining liberation or showcasing their sexiness rather than an unbiased appreciation of the sport. This undermines the possibility of treating them as serious fans, especially when interest in the physical attributes of athletes is portrayed as their primary motivation for following the sport. Thus, it is crucial to adopt a more impartial research approach that does not

exclude or discriminate against any gender when studying sports fans. Furthermore, qualitative research methods to investigate female fans remain inadequate, warranting more comprehensive exploration in this field. Enhancing the understanding of the similarities and differences between male and female fans and their identity construction will broaden research in this area and promote a deeper comprehension of gender relations in society.

This paper utilizes gender role socialization theory to explain the behavioral, attitudinal, and identity characteristics of female fans and how they construct their fan identity. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews and cyber ethnography methods. The identity construction methods of male fans are compared to those of female fans to explain the formation of unique female characteristics and explore the possible impact of different identity construction methods between genders. The primary themes of this paper can be divided into two questions: (1) What distinguishes the establishment and display of identity and behavior of female fans from that of male fans? (2) How does gender role socialization theory explain the difference in the establishment and validation of identity between male and female fans?

## 2. Literature Review

“Fan” refers to fans and fandoms. In the Internet era, fan research tends to focus more on organizations such as online communities and how people react under the context of fandom. A typical example is Baym’s study on the relationship between online community and social interaction [3].

Sandvoss contends that sports fans often represent one of two extremes in research: they can be perceived as mere followers of culture or as highly engaged individuals seeking emotional fulfillment [4]. In the latter scenario, researchers have focused extensively on the ways sports fans construct their identity, seek self-empowerment and create a unique fan culture and fandoms [5,6].

Studies on sports fans with gender classification are generally based on the aforementioned characteristics. It is worth noting that for a long time, sports participation was defaulted to be male-dominated. Though it has expanded now, female sports fans are still constrained by gender identity, cultural traditions, and other factors, which has led to some misunderstandings about them in society.

According to previous research, men are more likely than women to follow sports news and bet on match outcomes. Women’s motivations for watching competitions are more varied, as they may watch to learn, spend time with friends or family, or stay up-to-date with the latest trends [7]. Their motivations partly reflect women’s social identity discipline. Women’s social identity marks their otherness in the fan base, which requires them to experience the so-called socialization process to obtain a legitimized fan identity, especially during early years [8].

While sports fandom components have diversified over time, and women have found a sense of belonging in the fandoms, female fans are still subordinate and marginalized [9,10]. In recent years, scholars have analyzed that this may be due to the strict institutionalization of fan culture, making it a reproduction of traditional social norms where female fans are either treated differently or represented as subordinates to male fans [11].

Female fans are often objectified in society, and this perception is also evident in studies that depict them as symbols or objects. Many studies related to women’s sports in China are conducted under the framework of research on men, leading to surface-level conclusions and distorting the actual experiences of women [12]. Furthermore, some Chinese scholars pointed out that the domestic research on the characteristics of female soccer fans is one-sided. Many studies lack solid arguments and focus only on describing female Chinese soccer fans’ personalities, appearances, and preferences [13].

Fortunately, over the past 5 years, many papers have provided a deeper insight. For example, according to self-ethnographic research conducted by Yang Qian and Guo Qing, gender identity is a

significant factor that limits female sports fans, while they rely on power and resistance to develop their identity [14]. In general, the majority of current research on female soccer fans centers around the gender binary. Typically, sociological analyses on this subject employ the theories of Foucault or Bourdieu for in-depth exploration, often highlighting gender norms and differences in temperament [15].

Previous studies have shown that female soccer fans' behavior differs significantly from that of male fans, and the causes for such differences are varied and require further understanding. However, research on the specific behaviors of female Chinese soccer fans and their underlying causes is lacking. Thus, this paper examines the characteristics of female Chinese soccer fans in conjunction with gender role socialization, aiming to uncover the underlying reasons behind the differences between male and female fans and provide a more insightful interpretation.

### 3. Research Methods

This study defines “female Chinese soccer fans” as Chinese women who identify themselves as soccer fans. They may support a particular team, a specific soccer player, or both. The main research data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with female Chinese fans, with additional input from interviews with male fans and cyber ethnography from social media to analyze and explain the identity construction of female Chinese soccer fans.

Fifteen fans (10 women and 5 men) between the age of 18 to 52 were selected as interviewees through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The interview duration for each respondent was approximately 1.5 hours long. The reason for interviewing male fans is that it helps to understand the similarities and differences in behaviors and attitudes between male and female fans. Furthermore, the perceptions of male fans towards female fans can also reflect the influence of gender role socialization.

During the interview, four main topics were discussed. First, interviewees provided basic personal information. Second, their identity as fans was explored, mainly about the basic experience of a fan. Thirdly, their fan behaviors were collected to understand the patterns, characteristics, and emotions related to soccer. Finally, the interviewees were asked about their communication experience regarding gender roles, including their interactions with fans of different genders and their perceptions of others. To gain insight into their practices and perceptions as fans, the participants were asked open-ended questions about their fan identity and their views on the identity of other fans. The aim was to explore the reasons and ways in which their traits and views were influenced by gender roles.

In addition to interviews, this study conducted cyber ethnographic fieldwork to observe online soccer fan communities and their interactions, focusing on the behavior of female fans, the influence of gender on their practices, and the differences and conflicts between male and female fans. For data collection, Chinese social media platforms such as Baidu Tieba Forum, Douban Group, Lofter, Weibo, and WeChat groups for female soccer fans were selected.

The study adheres to the ethics and norms of online ethnography, anonymizes observation results, and clarifies the researchers' aim to other members in a timely manner during the research process.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

Despite individual differences, female fans exhibit similar behaviors as male fans, such as watching matches, displaying their identity, and joining fan communities. From this perspective, male and female soccer fans construct their identities similarly in terms of basic behavioral characteristics. However, female fans exhibit unique behaviors and attitudes beyond the macro behavior types observed in men, and it is worthwhile to explore the underlying reasons for these dissimilarities.

#### 4.1. Behind the Focus - Traditional Gender Roles' Influence

Soccer fans are united by their shared interest, which should not be restricted by gender. Nevertheless, female fans still encounter difficulties in shedding their gender label completely. Two factors contribute to this phenomenon: firstly, prejudice against female fans reinforces the significance of gender in soccer fandom; secondly, female fans have more diverse ways of enhancing and demonstrating their interest in soccer, as well as more methods to maintain their soccer fan identity. Participant F06 (24-year-old, female) described, "Pain and pleasure, sad by results but also touched by their (the team's) spirits, these make up my fan career".

Her feelings suggest that the sport event alone is not the only factor that attracts female fans. Emotional satisfaction obtained through watching matches, getting to know the team, and understanding the relationship between the players is sufficient to maintain female fans' identification with the sport.

Comparing this preference with male fans' pursuit of "strength" is interesting. In this study, all the male participants mentioned that they pay more attention to the so-called "pure, winner-takes-all" side of soccer. Such focuses are in accordance with the traditional definition of fans who concentrate on the sport itself. However, the stories of the female participants suggest that for female fans, loving the team is not only about appreciating the sport's experience but also the enjoyment of their emotional investment and the feedback they receive about the team or soccer player they support.

As expressive roles, women tend to be more family-oriented and emotionally expressive, actively seeking or providing emotional support; they pay more attention to social relationships and emotional ties than men, who are considered instrumental roles [16].

Women were believed to be obliged to play the expressive role, implying that they were objectified and underprivileged in society [17]. Contrary to this belief, this study shows how the perceptual traits associated with gender roles enable female fans to build their identity from various perspectives. These women explore their love for soccer through both competitive performance and off-field factors, and they strengthen their own subjectivity through these unique practices of identity construction, thereby realizing and strengthening their fan identity.

#### 4.2. Confusion and Self-Consistency - After Transcending Gender Roles

The long-standing social construction of the gender binary has made participation in soccer one of the ways to define male roles, while women are not considered competent players, even not able to be qualified fans [17]. Male fans often question the authenticity of women as soccer fans and their participation is censored within the fandom [9].

Recently, there has been an improvement in the understanding of female soccer fans, and more soccer teams and industry entities are acknowledging and respecting their rights and interests. However, female fans continue to be ridiculed and marginalized in more subtle ways. For instance, female participant F01 (20-year-old, female) said that most of her male acquaintances were amazed when they found out she loves soccer, particularly when she commented on tactics.

The amazement from men seems positive, but in fact, it falls under "benevolent sexism". The premise inside it is that "women rarely become fans like men do".

In many cultures, being a female fan can be seen as deviating from traditional gender roles, leading to incongruity. This exists not only in the impression of others (e.g., male acquaintances) but also within female fans. Many female participants said they are sometimes confused and unconfident about their fan identity construction. Although they all self-define as female fans, many hesitated to describe their motivations and practices for becoming soccer fans. F02 (18-year-old, female) stated: "I feel like I am a fake fan, I am superficial... I do care about the club's news, I do watch the matches,

I can remember the scores and scorers, but I do not understand the tactics very well, and I am too much attracted by the appearances of the players”.

Similarly, F07 (30-year-old, female) talked about her doubts about herself: “I am not the kind of person who watches every live broadcast because many matches kick off at midnight in China. Due to the time difference, I often get up to watch the highlights instead of staying up late to watch. Doesn’t it sound like I am not deeply loving my team”?

In the examples above, F02 considered her motivation to become a fan as “superficial” and stated that only those who understand soccer tactics can be called real fans. F07 believes that her inability to immediately show support for the team by watching live matches might lead others to speculate about her loyalty as a fan.

Participant F01 also mentioned having similar thoughts. She honestly admits to other girls that her motivation to be a fan is the appearance of a footballer. However, she also hopes to earn respect by hiding her motivation and disguising her ‘seniority’ as a fan in front of male fans. To male fans, she often claims that she watches soccer to appreciate the players’ techniques and has been a fan for six years (which is actually three years). In her opinion, having a longer experience of watching the game and possessing ‘more professional’ motivations to be a fan would make men respect her as a fan rather than dismissing her as an “unserious fangirl”.

As previously noted, the identity construction behaviors of female fans typically align with female gender roles. When female fans enter spaces dominated by strong masculine features, they may unconsciously adopt the behaviors and traits of male fans as benchmarks, leading to perceptions of otherness in comparison to both male and female fans and resulting in rejection of their own identity construction process. For this reason, some female fans will choose to imitate or make up to bridge the gap with male fans and gain recognition of their fan identity in interactions with others.

Moreover, the gender role norms internalized by female fans can often conflict with their identities as fans. For instance, female fans may experience tension between their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and soccer fans, due to having multiple identities and roles. This dilemma can be reflected in the perceptions of female fans themselves or in their expectations for other female fans or women in general.

For example, when asked how her parents thought of her becoming a fan, F01, who loves both soccer and tennis, explained in frustration that her mother did not support her playing soccer and watching soccer but encouraged her to play tennis, as her mother said tennis is “less barbaric” and “more suitable for girls”. F01 further explained that she now refrains from watching soccer in front of her parents and blocks them from viewing her soccer-related social media content.

Participant F08 (38-year-old, female) also described the tension of managing multiple roles. She is both a soccer fan and the mother of a three-year-old boy. During the interview, she was asked to imagine if she had a daughter who likes soccer, and whether she would support her to develop her hobby and become a soccer fan. She replied: “If she really likes it, I will respect her passion, but to be honest, I would not encourage my girl to develop a soccer hobby. It is easy to get hurt when playing soccer. Although it is normal for boys to get bumped or something like that, girls should be well-protected. Also, my daughter can be rejected by others only because she likes soccer and cannot have a common topic with other girls”.

In these examples, F01’s most prominent role attribute is that of a daughter, while F08 mainly replies from the perspective of a mother. F01 is expected to conform to the mainstream image of a gentle and elegant daughter, while the role expectation for F08 is that of a careful mother with the obligation to cultivate young women according to the dominant gender norms. After realizing society’s expectations of their roles, they adjusted their behavior accordingly.

Thus, the socialization of gender roles may make women’s fan identity a “nomadic subject”. This term originally refers to the attempt to change allegiance and subordination within the social structure

in order to circumvent the restrictions imposed by dominant forces and gain subjectivity [17]. This study demonstrates that female soccer fans adjust the presentation of fan identity according to their position in social relations, expectations of gender role, et cetera.

## 5. Conclusions

This study explores identity construction among female Chinese soccer fans, focusing on their unique motivations and behaviors. The paper also examines the underlying causes of this uniqueness from the perspective of gender role socialization.

This study finds that the identity construction practices of female fans place greater emphasis on emotional expression and display, which is linked to their subjectivity and enables them to bolster their fan identity in a distinctive manner.

Gender role socialization can not only explain the emphasis on emotion but also impact the fan identity of women. Soccer fandoms are not simply an interest-related community; instead, it has traditionally been one of the criteria for defining male roles. Furthermore, the expressive role traditionally given to women by norms results in a different mode of identity construction for women who enter into masculine sports areas. Female fans' internalized gender role norms lead them to self-examine and question their identity as a fan, motivations for being a fan, and methods of constructing their fan identity.

The study also indicates that female fans' multiple social identities often create tensions. Female fans face internal and external pressures that jeopardize their identity, forcing them to modify their recognition of fan identity based on other identities.

This paper is an empirical endeavor to attribute the identity construction of female Chinese soccer fans. This paper aims to enrich the research of Chinese female sports fans and contribute to more practical knowledge regarding fandoms. Moreover, it can inspire the analysis of the multiple social roles of men and women in China, contributing to constructing a leading sports nation and a harmonious society.

A limitation of this study is that it primarily focuses on the uniqueness of female fans and does not provide an exhaustive discussion of the various behaviors of female fans' identity construction. In addition, since the study participants are exclusively fans of men's professional soccer, there is a need for future research to investigate women's professional soccer fans as well.

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