The Influence, Causes, and Governance of Fan Circle Culture in Esports

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Abstract. In recent years, esport has grab global attention, and they are rapidly growing. At the same time, the scale of China's esports industry has continued to expand. As more people pay attention to esports, fan circle culture, which originally became popular in the entertainment industry, has gradually entered the esports field, bringing many irrational phenomena. These problems not only affect players and clubs but also damage the overall image of the esports industry. In order to clarify the causes of these problems and find possible solutions, this paper studies the phenomenon of fan circle chaos in esports. Based on authoritative industry reports and real cases from professional esports leagues, this paper presents the manifestations of fan circle chaos from the perspectives of players, clubs, and the industry. It further analyzes the causes from five levels: user psychology, platform algorithms, capital-driven interests, industry regulation, and cultural spillover. The fan circle phenomenon in esports is a stage-related problem during the rapid expansion of the industry. Only by focusing on competition itself and strengthening governance can the esports industry move toward healthy, standardized, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Enter key words or phrases in alphabetical order, separated by commas.

1. Research background and problem statement

In recent years, global attention toward esports has steadily increased. According to a 2024 report by People's Esport, the 2024 League of Legends World Championship reached a peak viewership of 6.94 million on overseas streaming platforms, once again setting a new record for international esports events and becoming the most popular esports competition in the world [1]. At the same time, China's esports industry has continued to expand rapidly. The 2024 China Game Industry Report stated that in 2024, China's esports industry generated actual sales revenue of 27.568 billion yuan, representing a year-on-year increase of 4.62%, while the esports user base reached 490 million, with a year-on-year growth of 0.42% [2]. Then, according to the 2025 China Esports Industry Report, China's esports industry revenue increased by 6.40% year-on-year in 2025, while the user base increased by 1.06% [3].

After esports was officially recognized as a legitimate sport in 2002, esports, as an emerging sports activity, gradually gained mainstream social recognition. Its core values lie in fair competition, teamwork, and sportsmanship. At the beginning, society generally did not take esports seriously and still regarded it as something trivial and unproductive. However, as the entire industrial system became more complete, esports has now been recognized as a genuine sports activity, completing a reconstruction of social values toward esports.

However, fan circle culture, characterized by idol worship, emotional polarization, and group mobilization, fundamentally conflicts with the rationality, objectivity, and respect for opponents advocated by esports. At present, China's esports industry has entered a period of rapid development. According to the 2025 China Esports Industry Report released by the China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association, the number of esports users in China has reached 495 million, and industry revenue has reached 29.331 billion yuan. Esports have officially become a competition event in the Asian Games and the Asian Indoor Games, and the industry's level of social recognition is gradually increasing [4].

At the same time, fan groups have expanded rapidly, and the mature fan operation models of the entertainment industry have gradually spread into esports, resulting in an obvious trend of fan circle

culture in esports [5]. Academic research on fandom in the esports industry recently emphasizes the fact that fans are motivated not only by entertainment consumption but also by emotional identification and social bonding. These studies suggest that esports audiences often form close psychological attachments to teams and players. For instance, All Gamers (AG) esport club from China, they have many different divisions that spread out over the industry. Their divisions include League of Legends, Cross Fire, Valorant, etc. All of their divisions got many trophies, so fans become highly emotionally invested in teams and players. Since they have always maintained a high standard, competition results and online discussions can easily lead to intense reactions and conflicts between fan groups [6].

Currently, problems such as cyberbullying of players, fan conflicts, conflicts at live events, coordinated comment manipulation, and excessive donations by minors frequently occur in the esports community. These problems not only damage players' mental and physical health and interfere with the normal operation of clubs but also weaken the core spirit of fair competition in esports, leading to a decline in the overall image of the industry. If esports fans lose their sense of boundaries, it will directly threaten the ecosystem of the esports industry. Therefore, studying the manifestations, causes, and solutions of fan circle chaos in esports is highly meaningful.

2. Main manifestations of fan circle chaos in the esports field

2.1. Against players

Competition losses often trigger large-scale cyberbullying. In top leagues such as the LPL and KPL, players being insulted, slandered, and personally attacked because of poor performances has become a common phenomenon. For example, famous players such as Uzi, Meiko, and TheShy all experienced long-term malicious attacks during periods of poor performance. Among them, Uzi has continued to face cyberbullying because of many incidents during his professional career. In particular, after losing to the European team G2 during the S8 season of League of Legends, the cyberbullying directed toward Uzi reached its peak.

Secondly, obsessive fan behavior has seriously violated player privacy. KPL player NuanYang was repeatedly followed, stalked, and harassed by phone calls for a long period of time. The addresses and family information of several players were maliciously exposed online, seriously affecting their normal lives. During a trip home for the Lunar New Year, he was even surrounded by obsessive fans. Unable to tolerate such behavior, he posted a long statement on social media Weibo criticizing the irrational actions of obsessive fans. He stated: "But now, whether they are paid photographers or obsessive fans, I really do not understand what kind of group they are. They have already seriously affected my normal life."

2.2. Against clubs

Long-term conflicts frequently occur between fans of different teams. Supporters of rival clubs insult each other, spread rumors, and attack one another on platforms such as Weibo, Baidu Tieba, and short-video platforms like tiktok. During offline competitions, some fans also shout insulting nicknames and display offensive banners.

Clubs are also forced into exhausting public opinion conflicts. Some extreme fans claim they are "protecting" their favorite players and pressure club management and coaching staff to compromise. They may even attack teammates and staff members, forcing clubs to spend large amounts of time and energy dealing with public opinion issues, which seriously affects training stability.

2.3. Against the industry

The manipulation of comments, popularization, and the activities of online water army alter public opinions. The organized fan groups manipulate comments, inflate popularity ratings, and stifle dissenting opinions, making the forum for discussing esports into a battlefield for competing fan groups while significantly hindering any meaningful discussion about the actual competitions.

Secondly, the issue of excessive spending and fundraising has become increasingly pressing. The fans spend money on virtual presents, purchase substantial merchandise, and generate higher revenue under the guise of supporting their favorite esports player. According to the 2024 Report on Chinese Adolescents' Online Behavior Research, over one-third of the adolescents have indulged in paying for activities on online platforms such as shopping and fan support activities [7].

3. Analysis of the causes of fan circle chaos in esports

3.1. User level

In terms of age group, most of the esports fans are young, especially between 18-24. Given that their minds have yet to develop fully, they lack control over their feelings and emotions. These people have the tendency to allow themselves to be driven by their emotions in regard to match outcomes and what other people say about them online. They express out their emotions by making threats to the players involved. Moreover, because they are attached to the players in an emotional sense, it becomes easier for them to participate in cyberbullying and other fan wars brought by events such as one player has bad performance in a game.

3.2. Platform level

At present, traffic-based recommendation systems are used by most short video platforms. Content distribution directly depends on the intensity of interactions and popularity. In this case, aggressive content naturally gets promoted by such algorithms. Objective comments about the matches usually do not get much attention, whereas aggressive actions such as mocking someone or spreading rumors easily get many likes and be more well-known. On the other hand, platforms are reluctant to control excessive speech and rumors due to their eagerness to be more popular and earn more profit.

3.3. Club level

The esports industry relies heavily on income from fan culture. The earnings of clubs, streaming websites, and merchandise companies are tightly linked to fan purchasing power. Influenced by business motives, some esports enterprises accept or even embrace fan group management tactics. Through building personal IPs for players, it will be easier for the club, and the player boost their online presence. This leads fans to contribute financially, buy merchandise and improve rankings. In such a profit first system, unreasonable investments by fans are continuously encouraged, and fan group madness can persist.

3.4. Industry level

There is an obvious imbalance between its development and supporting regulation construction. In this regard, an integrated system of practical industrial rules has not yet been formed. When it comes to regulating fan activities, protecting player’s privacy rights, dealing with cyber-bullying cases, restraining the expenditure of minors, and reasonable fundraising, there is no practical standard established and effective punishment applied. There will always be a situation where everyone tries to shirk responsibility when facing issues, which leads to chaos in the fan community.

3.5. Cultural level

Under the influence of the mature and highly organized fan culture of the entertainment industry, fan circle culture has rapidly spread into esports through social media. Common fan circle behaviors such as voting campaigns, comment manipulation, fan support activities, fan conflicts, and doxxing have all been directly copied into the esports community. Esports fans imitate the celebrity worship model of the entertainment industry and apply it to professional esports players. Combined with the rapid spread of information and the polarization effect of social media, esports culture, which

originally focused on competition itself, has gradually been eroded by fan circle culture, eventually forming a comprehensive trend of fan circle culture in esports.

Research on Chinese esports fandom shows that esports fan communities have gradually become more similar to entertainment fandom culture. According to Zheng and Pawlik, social media platforms helped turn professional players into online idols, causing fans to focus more on emotional loyalty, popularity, and online influence instead of competition itself. This explains why organized fan conflicts, online attacks, and extreme fan behavior have become more common in esports communities [8].

4. The dual impact of fan circle culture on the esports industry

4.1. Positive impacts

4.1.1. Increased event attention and popularity

Esports fan activities can positively affect the industry by increasing the popularity of events, increasing players' recognition, and online engagements, thus making it easier for esports to stand out in the society. Fans' expenditure contributes towards boosting ticket sales, livestream viewership, sales of merchandise, and sponsorships, and other factors that have contributed to the growth of the industry.

Notably, such an industry boost has made cities that play hosts receive more tourists. If competitions are continuously held in the same city, that city may gradually become an "esports holy land" in the minds of fans. This can bring economic benefits to local areas by creating employment opportunities and supporting related industries. For example, near the building of the Chinese esports team Edward Gaming, there is a noodle restaurant that is frequently visited by players. After this became famous, many EDG fans traveled there specifically to try the dishes preferred by their favorite players. This brought significant economic benefits to the restaurant owner, who later posted many photos of players in the restaurant to help fans take pictures and visit the location [9].

4.2. Negative impacts

4.2.1. Against players

To start, cyberbullying, personal attacks, and rumors directly create pressure and emotional problems for players, leading to negative impacts that make them perform badly in matches and shorten their careers. Current LOL player in TES esport club fengyue has been Surrounded and abuse. The reason why that this happened is because he led the team to lose a game, and the most famous player, Jackeylove's fan group started to insult him and let him retire. In addition, behaviors such as stalking by obsessive fans, privacy leaks, and harassment seriously interfere with players' normal lives and reduce their sense of personal security [10].

4.2.2. Against clubs

Rivalries among supporter groups of competing teams, together with fan protection actions that are close to extreme behavior, cause clubs to spend a lot of time and effort managing their image, which then disrupts preparation. Moreover, extreme behavior among fans negatively affects the team atmosphere and impacts development and cooperation.

4.2.3. Against the industry

The acts of comment manipulation and online army have a serious impact; it left out discussion about the competition itself. As it gets more and more popular, the talk about how competitive the game is will be less and less, which in turn has weakened the culture of competitive sports. Meanwhile, fan violence reduces the social acceptance of esports and undermines their reputation and prospects of sustained development [11].

5. Governance strategies and optimization paths

5.1. Platform management: strengthening content regulation

Esports-related discussion control policy or systemshould be set up to stop people from insulting, spreading rumors, and abusing. The discussion created by the online army that wants to promote a bad environment shouuld be banned. Moreover, more emphasis should be laid on content related to competition. For example, social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin could establish filtering systems for LPL and KPL discussion sections to automatically remove insulting nicknames and personal attacks directed at players. Simultaneously, limit the accounts involved in these kinds of comments. Then, guide the focus back about the discussion of competitions.

5.2. Industry self-regulation

Esports organization of different games should make rules regarding normal fans and player's right protection. It would be best to include prohibitions on cyberbullying, stalking, comments manipulation, and irrational fund-raising. Clubs need to assign positions responsible for managing fans, which should mirror the role played by moderators on live stream platforms to ensure proper behavior and avoid extremes.

For example, esports associations could jointly release an Esports Fan Behavior Code to ban fans who repeatedly surround players offline or spread online rumors from entering competition venues or purchasing tickets. Clubs could also regularly publish reminders promoting civilized spectating through official accounts and quickly intervene in conflicts between fan groups.

5.3. Policy regulation

The government should strengthen enforcement against cyberbullying, doxxing, and privacy violations while increasing legal consequences for illegal behavior. Real-name verification systems and spending limits for people should also be created to limit irrational expenditure towards a player or a club.

Adding on, livestreaming platforms should use facial recognition and age verification systems to limit inmature fan spending. At the same time, accounts that leak players' family information or organize online wars should face legal responsibility through formal legal measures.

5.4. User education

Schools and families should strengthen education related to internet literacy and rational fan behavior. Fans should be guided to respect players, respect competition, and watch esports events in a civilized manner. Support for players should focus on performance inside competitions rather than irrational idol worship.

For instance, clubs and tournament organizers can promote healthy fan culture through guidance videos and posters, and offline educational activities. Professional players can also participate in public awareness events to educate fans. In addition, internet literacy education should be introduced into primary and secondary school classes in order to guide younger generations toward healthy online behavior from an early age.

6. Conclusion

Fan circle chaos in esports is the result of the combined influence of user psychology, platform algorithms, commercial interests, weak industry regulations, and cultural spillover. Although fan circle culture increases the popularity and commercial value of esports, it also creates problems such as cyberbullying, conflicts between fan groups, manipulation of public opinion, and excessive consumption, all of which threaten player rights and the ecosystem of the industry.

In the future, as esports continue to become more professionalized, standardized, and sports-oriented, fan circle chaos may gradually be reduced. Only by firmly maintaining the competitive

essence of esports and strengthening collaborative governance can China's esports industry maintain both commercial value and public attention while establishing a healthy, professional, and civilized industry image, eventually becoming a legitimate sport with international influence.

The core of esports is competition, not about creating a celebrity or an idol. Only through all the restrictions and policies across different platforms and the government, and guidance of fair and healthy environment of the esport industry can elet sports return to the core of fair competitive sports and achieve long-term, high-quality development.

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