

Fan-Circle Characteristics of NBA Players' Cut Videos on Douyin: A Comparative Case Study of LeBron James and Stephen Curry

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Abstract. In recent years, short video platforms such as Douyin have rapidly gained popularity in China, with sports content becoming a major component of online media. Fan culture, traditionally rooted in entertainment, has increasingly permeated sports communities, reshaping the interaction between athletes and their fans. This study investigates how fan culture manifests in Douyin “cut” videos of NBA players LeBron James and Stephen Curry, and how these manifestations contribute to athlete idolization and brand communication. Using content analysis, the ten most-liked videos of each player over the past month were analyzed. Results show that James's videos emphasize competitive highlights, while Curry's focus more on approachable, lifestyle-oriented content. Common fan culture elements—such as emotional comments and participatory engagement—were found to reinforce athlete images and deepen fan loyalty. This study contributes to the understanding of athlete branding in the era of short video and bridges the gap between fan culture and sports communication research.

Keywords: Douyin, NBA, Fandom, Cut Videos

1. Introduction

1.1. The rise of short video platforms and the convergence of sports and fan culture

Through the rapid development of short video platforms like Douyin in China, sports content has become more important in the Chinese digital media landscape [1]. Douyin is one of the most influential short video platforms, becoming an important channel for the dissemination of sports news and athletes' updates. It gives fans more opportunities to get in touch with sports content in fragmented time and increases the exposure of the athletes [1, 2]. Athletes become figures with commercial values and cultural significance, but not sports players on the court [3]. At the same time, fan-club culture had expanded to the sports field from the entertainment industry. Fans actively participate in content production by producing comments, storytelling, and secondary video editing [4]. They are not just viewer of the contents, but contributors to those products. This phenomenon changes the way sports stars interact with their fans, and also affects the strategy of how the sports brand operates [4, 5]. Short video platforms have become a major field for social contact. Under this

background, for a better understanding of the new strategy of sports communication and the content of “fan-club culture”, research about the features of “fan-club culture” on short video platforms is needed.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives on athlete branding and fan participation

Athletes' branding research became a crucial task in sports communication in these years. Arai et al. proposed the model Athlete Brand Image, which puts athletes' branding in three parts: marketable lifestyle, athletic performance, and attractive appearance [3]. This provides a framework for analyzing idolization and athlete branding. But, most researchers still focus on some common media branding strategy, not some short video platform which is fast-spreading [3]. The rise of short video platforms affects the fan culture, how the fans interact with the athletes. Fans become the content creators and participants in the brand. Pegoraro states that by participating in original content, comments, and community activities, fans create a great impact for the brand [4]. This trend is fan-club culture, which originated from the entertainment industry, that can increase the emotional connections in communication. Also, the low-barrier short video platform has provided more opportunities for fans to create content [5]. The meme-like styles and fragmented storytelling Douyin uses let the fans easily and quickly produce and share sports clips and original content that create an entertaining and varied image for the athletes [5]. However, the research on athlete branding, fan culture, and short video platforms is mature in their specific fields, but they are too separate and lack research that combines the three [3-5]. Also, the lack of analysis in comparing athletes across cases creates value for this research.

1.3. Research gap and questions in the context of Douyin fan videos

The current research status can't help us have a clear understanding of the process of idolization and athletes' branding, and how fan culture interacts with short video platforms mechanisms interact. In addition, the shortage of cross-case research on different athletes limits our understanding of different fan groups and branding strategies. This research focuses on NBA players LeBron James and Stephen Curry, who are different in style and fan bases. This research answers two key questions: first, what fan culture characteristics have occurred on the cut video of NBA players on Douyin? Second, how do these characteristics promote the idolization of the players and influence brand communication? The discussion of these two questions will help to understand the role of fan culture in short video sports and provide insights for brands to formulate communication strategies. For methodology, a systematic analysis has been done about cut videos and comment areas related to LeBron James and Stephen Curry by using a content analysis method combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

2. Methodology

This study adopts the content analysis as the main research method [6]. Content analysis reveals the deeper content of media by using the combination of quantitative and qualitative, it emphasizes systematic, replicable, and objective procedures. Content analysis has been widely used in social media research, especially for the study of the interactions between the content and users on short video platforms [7]. The research objects for this study are hot cut video of NBA players LeBron James and Stephen Curry on Douyin. In order to ensure the representativeness of the objects, the study choose the top 10 most liked videos from the past 30 days for both players, totally 20 videos

[8]. Videos with high liked means the high engagement of the fans, which can better reflect the focus point of the fans and the recommendation mechanisms of the platform [8]. The selection of popular videos also ensure that the contents has already gain wide transmission. This study focuses on two analytical dimensions: video dimension and comment dimension. Video dimension focus on the content and the type of the video, such as match highlights, life clips, fan interaction, etc. Then, comment dimension focuses on fan interaction behaviors, emotional expression, and the frequency of fan-based language the fans used, such as, “yyds”, and “amazing”, “legend” “GOAT” [9]. In order to ensure the systematicity and repeatability of the research, this study adopts the table-based coding method. Every 20 videos was inserted into the structured table, that contains basic information and the analytical dimensions. The table contains a row that represented the number of the video (e.g., video 1, video 2, video 3), and a column that represented players name, video title, video link, publish date, number of likes, number of comments, number of shares, video type, originality, and the tag. This type of structured table can organize the data clearly and can show a obvious difference between LeBron James and Stephen Curry. For example, the table can reveal did Stephen Curry’s life clips gained more supportive comments than LeBron James’ game highlights videos. In the quantitative analysis, this study uses basic statistical method to count the number of likes, comments, shares, and the frequency of the occurrence of fan-based language. The use of this tool can represent the result into a more visual way. In the qualitative analysis, comments were read and grouped in order to identify fans’ language style, emotional style, and idolization trends. One of Stephen Curry’s life clip video was analyzed to show how the structured table work. Record showed that this is a “lifestyle” video, which used “light music” as the background music, and the subtitles used a lot of popular internet slang. In addition, in the comments, the idolizing tendency has shown by fans’ language use, like, “yyds”, “the legend”, “the cutest”, etc. This example showed that the use of structured table could clearly documented the contents and comments of the video, directly help the process of analysis [10]. Overall, this method increase the rigor of the study, and supports other researchers have a further follow-up research.

3. Findings

Table 1. Stephen Curry and LeBron James cut video sample data

Video Number	Player Name	Video Topic	Publish Time	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of Shares	Video Type	Original or Not	Top Fan Comments
V1	Curry	Curry’s Accuracy	8/17/2025	476k	11k	101k	Training Clip	Not	Sharp Shooter
V2	Curry	Unmatched Energy	8/17/2025	408k	23k	52k	Fan Interaction	Yes	Here Comes Curry
V3	Curry	Goodnight Paris	8/10/2025	406k	4.4k	27k	Game Highlight	No	World Masterpiece
V4	Curry	China Tour Training	8/17/2025	320k	3k	32k	Training Clip	Not	Game Winner
V5	Curry	Curry Walks To Fan	8/21/2025	100k	1.2k	6.7k	Fan Interaction	Not	Only For Curry
V6	Curry	Curry Iso Evolution	8/14/2025	91k	3.5k	6.8k	Game Analysis	Not	Legend

Table 1. (continued)

V7	Curry	Curry with Zhu	9/3/2025	89k	0.2k	0.7k	Fan Interaction	Not	Legend
V8	Curry	Cute Curry	8/20/2025	85k	1.9k	31k	Lifestyle Clip	Not	Super Cute
V9	Curry	Dunk King	8/18/2025	47k	1.7k	5.2k	Game Highlight	Not	Dunk King of GSW
V10	Curry	Enjoy Watching Curry	8/20/2025	34k	0.7k	1.6k	Training Clip	Not	Insane Play
V11	James	James Waltz	9/5/2025	396k	6k	21k	Fan Interaction	Not	Legend
V12	James	James In Chengdu	9/5/2025	189k	60k	128k	Lifestyle Clip	Not	He's Here
V13	James	Rainy Fan Meeting	9/5/2025	185k	1k	19k	Fan Interaction	Yes	Much Love
V14	James	Long 3 & Dunk	9/5/2025	138k	2.9k	26k	Game Highlight	Not	Dunk King
V15	James	GOAT James	8/23/2025	133k	5.4k	34k	Fan Interaction	Not	GOAT
V16	James	Message to Youth	9/4/2025	111k	0.7k	8.6k	Fan Interaction	Yes	Greatest Basketball Player
V17	James	King James	8/29/2025	92k	2.4k	13k	Training Clip	Not	Ace
V18	James	Crown Moment	9/5/2025	73k	0.4k	0.9k	Lifestyle Clip	Yes	yyds
V19	James	Self Alley-Oop	8/14/2025	66k	3.2k	3k	Game Highlight	Yes	Fired Up
V20	James	Human Ceiling	8/9/2025	26k	1.7k	2k	Lifestyle Clip	Not	So Amazing

According to the study conducted, Curry's cut video present a daily lifestyle clip, it was more about his interactions with fans and his humorous activities. He had shaped as an accessible star by the content showed in his video. For example, in his training clips, he always practiced in a relaxed way and occasionally says some interesting things and jokes. And in the fan interaction videos, he smiles all the time and interact with fans like a friend. In the contrast, Jame's cut video are more competitive and expressiveness, which seems more passionate. Most of his high-liked videos are games highlight, high-intensity training, and dunk practice, these videos portrayed him as a "legend" and "King, as table 1 displayed. Therefore, Curry has shaped as a basketball star with strong affinity, and James has positioned as a heroic basketball model player. Fan-club language and terms had appeared in the comments frequently, like, "yyds", "only for Curry", "Dunk King", "much love", etc. Those strong emotional phrases represents fans extreme admiration and love to the players. Fans use personalized and emotional language to strengthen emotional connections. Instead of only fans'

express emotion in the comment, they also participate in secondary creation. Most of the video that had analysis in this study were not original, while most of them were fans' re-edit highlights, and lifestyle clips. Fans are not just passive consumers, but become the creator of the content creation, this not only extends the influence of the video, it also shaped the circulation of the content. Curry's fan participated in secondary creations more actively compared with James, many of his lifestyle clips has been re-edit and create into new form. In the contrast, James' video has been less re-edited because his image had been portrayed on game highlight and official clips. This difference reflects how fan interaction mode could change and adapt base on the players image and content. Lastly, the difference were magnified by the algorithmic recommendation of Douyin. Overall, the fan-club culture on Douyin were formed by the image of players, fan participation, and the algorithmic recommendation.

4. Conclusion

This study finds that there are recognizable features of fan-club culture shown in the cut videos of the NBA payers in Douyin. Fan-club culture has a great impact on digital sports communication by the existence of supporting comments and idolizing tags. Moreover, the two athletes of the research objects reflected different idolization characteristic. LeBron James often appear as a legendary and tough guy on Douyin, while Curry is usually shows up as a star shooter and an affable figure in which to achieve idolization. The difference between the characteristics between players determine the method and mode of how fans participate in comments and creations. In the aspect of theory, this study spread fan-club culture from entertainment industry to the sports field, which has enriched related research in academic perspectives. This study fulfilled the gap between fan-club culture and the study of sports communication, also demonstrates how the process of athletes idolization had accelerated by the short video platforms. It offers a cross-disciplinary perspective that combines sports communication, social media, and fan culture on Douyin. This provides a new insight for the transition of participation mode and fan identity construction in short video era. Through this research, some insights can be gain from was what communication strategies athletes and sports brands should adopt on short video platforms. The most important thing is that the content creation should emphasize emotional expression and co-creation because this can increase fan engagement and their loyalty to the athletes or sports brands. Then, the athletes and sports brands should use fan language and adopt interaction mode flexibly. For example, some internet slang, such as, "yyds", etc, this can strengthen the sense of closeness and belonging between fans and the brands or the athletes. The last but not least that cannot be ignored is the communication strategy should be created variously base on the characteristics and images of the athletes because a uniform strategy is not suitable for everyone. Just like the conclusion from this study, which James' image could promoted by creating a inspirational story type, and Curry's amiable image could be design as life-related content. Even so, there is still some limitations in this study. The sample for the study was limited to two basketball players on Douyin, which could affect the universality of the final findings. Futhermore, the analysis of fan-culture language were mainly focus on the most-like comments, that may not contain the variety of fan language. In the future, more researches can focus widely on other sports, such as soccer, baseball, tennis, etc, and to other social media platforms, like Tiktok, Youtube, Twitter, or Instagram for further analysis. Moreover, in-depth interview and questionnaire could incorporated into the study which can conduct a more comprehensive analysis.

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