Research on the significance of post a sports virtual community under Pseudo-environment—— Take the Douban group Sports Without Circle as an example

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Abstract. The network community formed by the Douban group once occupied an important part in the development process of China's network community, but with the indefinite ban and suspension of a number of Douban groups and illegal users by the nationwide campaign to purify the online environment, the vigor of Douban users has gradually decreased, and new media such as Weibo, WeChat, and short videos are also emerging. It impacts the living environment of Douban. However, throughout the entire Douban platform, the group Sports Without Circle still maintains a strong activity and is currently the largest virtual community focusing on discussing sports events and athletes. With case studies, this article explores the causes of construction, interactive behaviour, communication characteristics, and operation mechanism of the Douban group Sports Without Circle under "Pseudo-environment", tries to explore the construction significance and positive social effects of the virtual community of sports culture, and puts forward a prospect for the future development of the Douban group in the era of media convergence.

Keywords: Pseudo-environment; virtual community; sports culture;Douban group; self-identity.

1. Introduction

"*Pseudo-environment*" is a concept put forward by the American scholar Lippmann in *Public Opinion* in 1922, which means an information environment different from the real environment and formed by mass communication, which not only restricts people's cognition and behavior, but also affects the objective real environment by restricting people's cognition and behavior. Douban.com was born in the early 21st century. And Douban Group is a major social service in addition to book, audio and video scoring and market purchase functions. It has built a "*Pseudo-environment*" that brings together the same interest groups to discuss topics, and has also ushered in a prosperous period. Later, in response to the "fan community" network chaos existing on Douban.com, China launched a nationwide campaign *Qinglang* to purify the online environment and stationed Douban.com to urge rectification, banned and suspended a number of Douban groups and illegal users indefinitely, and the overall vigor of Douban.com began to decline. However, the author found that the Douban group called *Sports Without Circle* has always existed as a head gathering place for domestic sports enthusiasts since it was founded. Compared with similar groups, its users are more active, especially under the continuous impact of new media such as Weibo, WeChat and short videos, it is still in the field of sports. It occupies an unshakeable place in the online community. Seeing this, this article tries to explore the reasons why the Douban group *Sports Without Circle* can still carve out a niche and have a higher user stickiness in the new media torrent under the threshold of "*Pseudo-environment*", combine with specific cases to analyze the interaction behavior and social mode of users in this network community and summarize communication characteristics and operation mechanism of the Douban group in order to explore the construction significance and positive social effects of the virtual community of sports culture.

2. Literature Review

"*Pseudo-environment*" is the information environment, which does not reproduce the real objective environment just like the reflection of a simple mirror, but simplifies, processes and

reconstructs events or information in the real world through the media. With the development of media, many virtual spaces have been built, such as QQ groups, WeChat groups, video bullet screens, Douban groups etc. In these Internet-based virtual spaces, people with common hobbies and needs have gradually formed *a network community* [1], disseminating and sharing information and get a comfortable interactive experience. These virtual spaces are "*Pseudo-environment*s".

In the latest research on "*Pseudo-environment*", it mostly focuses on the analysis of new media such as short videos. For example, scholar Quehui Li mentioned in *Tiktok will reconstruct the Pseudo-environment in 5W mod*e[2]. It is proposed that TikTok reconstructs the *Pseudo*-environment, but the environment constructed in the process of information screening and dissemination deviates greatly from the real environment. In *Reflections on the Construction of a New Model of Mobile Short Video and Pseudo-environment: A Perspective Based on Media Technology*[3], scholar Yan He mentioned that in the construction of a new *Pseudo-environment* for short videos, problems such as the intensification of "information cocoons" and more diversified value points ultimately lead to the weakening of environmental monitoring functions and social integration capabilities.

Douban.com, which was officially launched in 2005, is a product of the web 2.0 period and had rich academic achievements related to it, but there was a lack of research on combining "*Pseudo-environment*" and "Douban group" based on the context of the new era. Moreover, compared with other fields such as *Zhong Guo San Nong Fa Bu* in the field of agriculture, head website, to form matrix dissemination on multiple platforms, at present, there are fewer authoritative media or head accounts that can achieve full platform content output in the field of sports, and there are gaps in such research. This article chooses the Douban group *Sports Without Circle* as its research object, not only because it has a relatively large audience base and extensive community effect, but also because it is a clear case that has existed for a long time and stronger user vigor in the domestic sports field. This article tries to explore the reason why sports fans did not form a virtual community in short videos or other fields, but chose the Douban group as an active sports spirit gathering place through an in-depth analysis of the Douban group *Sports Without Circle*, which is helpful to gain insight into China's current situation and future trend of chemical communication of sports culture.

3.   Analysis And Results

3.1 Basic information of the Douban group Sports Without Circle

Douban group *Sports Without Circle* was created on August 30, 2021. According to the annual data of 2022, from December 1, 2021, to December 1, 2022, there were 37883 team members, 23320 new team members, 25432 posts, and 1788346 new interactions every year. As of October 21, 2023, there were 38843 team members. Other users of the Douban platform often call the group *Sports Without Circle* "Circle Group". In this group, all team members have a nickname, which is "Juanjuan". The group focuses on discussing sports events and athletes and has six major sections of team members punching, daily discussion, athletes, event discussion, sport popularization/analysis and group affairs as daily activities. One of the characteristics of the group is a summary of major events to help team members grasp global event information in real time. Among the daily posts and follow-up posts, there are the most hot posts about sports players and event discussions.

3.2 The purpose and group rules of the Douban group Sports Without Circle

The original intention of this group is that most of the people gathered here are sports enthusiasts. Maybe they like different projects, but because they like the spirit of competitive sports, they are attracted by the elegant demeanor of the athletes on the field and gather here to watch the game and discuss the game. Here, everyone is welcome to speak freely and popularize the rules and skills of the event, pure content, classic competitions, and also discuss athletes' achievements and interesting things in life, etc. These are the original intentions of the Douban group. It is worth mentioning that the group's Douban homepage also particularly emphasized the group's purpose and rules, that is, "the

sweat behind every medal should be remembered, and every athlete deserves respect. Reject all acts of pulling and discrediting athletes.". In this group, members who want to join the group need to send an application to the administrator or team leader and state the reasons for joining the group *Sports Without Circle*. Then, the team leader and administrator review the registration time of the application account and the number of times the account has been blocked. If the registration time of the account is less than three months or the number of bans is greater than three times, the application cannot be approved. After the review is approved, users can enter the group to become a formal team member and abide by the group rules by default, requiring them to post in a unified format for exchange and search, such as "Event Discussion | [Table Tennis]...", and "Sports player | [Diving] Yuxi's Chen Paris cycle (double Grand Slam next championship) " and so on. In the group *Sports Without Circle*, each athlete can only have one recommendation post. The group members are required to speak objectively to avoid incendiary remarks, prohibiting athletes from being substituted as "anti names" or discussing the non-public personal privacy of athletes etc. All kinds of interactions should comply with the rules of the group, otherwise, group members will be kicked out of the group. It can be seen that the group has certain application standards and is operated strictly under the group rules.

3.3 The characteristics of the members of the Douban group Sports Without Circle

"Communicators and the audience form a two-way interactive relationship of transmission and acceptance. Everyone has the right and opportunity to create and spread topics. The vague audience of discourse turn into the personalized audience in the network virtual society."[4] Under the "strict" group application mechanism, this virtual community has a higher threshold than other communities and has higher self-identity requirements for team members, which also presents many characteristics. First, the team member should be at least enthusiast of one sport such as basketball, football, badminton, gymnastics, diving, skiing. It is clearly required to have a certain love and understanding of at least one sport, which is obviously different from other sports community requirements that are compatible with sinking markets. Second, it will have a certain fan effect. In the athlete section, each post will recommend an athlete to record the highlights of their sports career, and the athlete's fans will interactively engage in the post. At the same time, they will attract other fans or team members who like the athlete to join the discussion and keep replying to the post to increase the popularity. Third, the team members are more professional. Because obtaining information about relevant events and athletes in the group is faster and more real, compared with short videos, most of the team members who speak here hope to interact with their peers who have a certain understanding of a sport, so the team members' replies in posts such as event discussions are more professional and self-thinking.

3.4 Multiple subjects participate in the construction process of "*Pseudo-environment*"

The development of the Internet provides diversified online social spaces and new fields. The strong anonymity of virtual spaces provides people with a certain sense of security. More and more people complete interaction ritual and seek self-identity in the virtual space. Randall Collins believes that *"rituals are the result of the relative customization of various behaviour and postures and are the source of social motivation. The image presented by each individual in society is gradually formed in the social interaction with others."*[5] In the group *Sports Without Circle*, interactive topics are diversified and personalized, with professional popular science posts and in-depth discussions such as "Daily discussions | Competitive sports itself is already very cruel, and is it more cruel to make an athlete's sports career worth only once in 4 years?" etc. and with certain humanistic care and universal value. There are also interesting and novel posts with entertainment attributes, such as making fun of athletes' private uniforms, collecting friendly interactions between athletes, sorting out group photos of athletes with the cutest height difference, sharing athletes' emoji, etc. In addition, due to the huge flow and discussion in the group *Sports Without Circle*, some recommendation posts that record niche athletes are also easier to break the circle, such as "Athletes | Dreams Bloom in the Dust - Xiaojuan Luo, a gold medal member of the women's Fencing team at the 2012 London Olympics" tells about

Xiaojuan Luo, as a fencer, her hardship, regret and repost self-confidence has attracted the attention of many users. The post "Launching a Trampoline Amway/Popular Science post" comprehensively introduces the characteristics, rules, competition process and well-known players of the trampoline project, and indirectly popularizes minority sports.

In addition, the information release and dissemination of the Douban group *Sports Without Circle* has the characteristics of massive and extensive. Taking badminton as an example, you can see the details of all international badminton league events, the global score ranking of athletes, the real-time discussion of major badminton events, badminton athletes' sports career records, Sudirman Cup and other event viewing strategies in the group, which is convenient for badminton enthusiasts to search for information and make it easier for everyone to know about this project, getting more knowledge in a short time.

In the Douban group, multiple subjects participate in the construction of a "*Pseudo-environment*". Everyone sincerely shares and discusses enthusiastically. It is not easy to be criticized by unfair criticisms such as "keyboard warrior", "brainwashing packages" and "selective censorship", so that the thread starter, team members who reply to posts, and users who browse posts can build a good community atmosphere in a more free space.

3.5 The "*Pseudo-environment*" built by Douban group is *"symbolic reality"*

Lippmann mentioned in *Public Opinion*, "*Yet even the eyewitness does not bring back a whole picture of the* scene. *He himself brings something to the scene which later he takes away from it, that oftener than not what he imagines to be the account of an event is really a transfiguration of it. Few facts in consciousness seem to be merely given. Most facts in consciousness seem to be partly made.*"[6] Just as the Douban group *Sports Without Circle* builds an unreal environment, but an information environment based on reality. For example, in the post "Athletes | Interaction of Women's Freestyle Skiers, mainly Eileen Gu", the details of the interaction between Eileen Gu and other freestyle skiers are recorded, showing the friendly and interactive side of athletes from different countries. However, in such a "*Pseudo-environment*", only part of the personality of the athlete can be glimpsed. The image of the athlete cannot be completely real after the "intentional processing" of the post's "picture + text", and there is an error in the impression formed between people.

In the omnimedia era, team members can obtain sports information everywhere, forming their own views and expressing them in group discussions. Then they will be liked by other team members or members outside the group to gain self-identity. Although the Douban group provided by Douban says goodbye to one-way content output and input to a certain extent, due to the limitations of information acceptance, it is often impossible to understand the whole picture of things, resulting in different understandings and reactions when different group members receive different information, such as seeing athletes in different social lines. For this reason, some team members think it is "normal socialisation" and some team members think it is some kind of "interest promotion". The two-way interaction established by the "*Pseudo-environment*" itself is subjective and biased, and the symbolic reality presented is also different from the real reality.

4. Disscussion

4.1 The audience has completed group interaction and emotional self-identity in the "*Pseudo-environment*"

In the post "Daily discussion | Do you have any photos of competitive sports that you particularly like?", there are photos of Nadal when he was young, a tennis player who announced his retirement in 2024. And photos of table tennis player Ning Ding kissing the trophy, and photos of tennis player Federer's retirement, etc. These photos have awakened the common memory of the members who has been posting in the post to recall their youth and express their love for competitive sports. Popularization/analysis | The post "History of Women's Participation in the Olympic Games" sorts

out the origin of women's events, the history of women's participation and the contributions made by female athletes. "Athletes | The difficulty as a female athlete - to Wenjing Sui" recorded the story of Sui Wenjing's strict weight control during the Winter Olympics and she was even less than 40 kilograms. In the reply of the post, you can see that many female team members appealed for "less appearance humiliation", and you can also see the team members' inspiration by sexual power encouragement and their support and expectations for women's competitive sports.

Xiaoyan Liang proposed, "*In the interaction based on virtual space, people have a sense of self-identity and sense of belonging when they are understood and respected in the process of emotion, information and material exchange.*"[7] Lippmann believed that *whatever the tests of admission, the social set when formed is not a mere economic class, but something which more nearly resembles a biological clan, or, to speak more exactly, with the attitudes and desires that are involved.*[8] In the group *Sports Without Circle*, the team members share information and knowledge and exchange views and experiences, completing group interaction and forming a social network with group interaction, in which they obtained emotional support and the self-identity of "sports enthusiasts", triggering emotional resonance and forming the emotional intimacy of the community in addition to complete the establishment of this high-quality community.

4.2 "*Pseudo-environment*" is a dynamic reflection of the real environment

Besides the record of the schedule, in the post "Event Discussion | [Finished] 2023 Sudirman Cup · World Badminton Mixed Team Championship (3 consecutive championships, 13th championship)", praise for the athletes' sports spirit were included in the 44,000 replies of this post and many team members were deeply touched. In the group, we often see "blessing posts" and "revening posts". To a certain extent, the existence of these posts bears the emotional sustenance of the team members. Therefore, the construction value and significance of the sports virtual community deserves our attention.

"*To that Pseudo-environment his behavior is a response*", but if these behaviors form specific actions, "*The consequences, operate not in the Pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates.*"[9] In the Douban group, freedom of speech, maintaining personality, multiple user selectivity, large voice of sports enthusiasts, tolerance and openness to various sports, which to a certain extent helps to improve the public's understanding of social issues and the recognition and dissemination of the core of competitive sports spirit. Especially when the members of the group *Sports Without Circle* find that athletes have been rumored, they will collect information from different platforms or official websites and sort out the history of the incident to refute the rumors. Compared with the information in the rumors, these clarification posts are more comprehensive, logical and authoritative. Many popular science posts that "break rumors" also encourage team members to have more courage to call for justice and truth in the future. The key to the active response to real life is to restore public trust between platform communities. Public trust is a key factor for the order, justice and normal development of the network society within effective boundaries.[10]

As one of the channels for the audience to understand sports projects and athletes, the Douban group *Sports Without Circle* is essentially a "virtual community", but such a "virtual community" can bring them the power to inspire themselves and complete their own growth, thus having a positive and favorable impact on real life and ultimately promoting our country. The beneficial spread of culture and the harmonious and prosperous development of society.

5. Conclusion

It has been nearly 20 years since the establishment of Douban.com, and it has only been three years since the establishment of the group *Sports Without Circle*, which was born after a nationwide campaign *Qinglang*. As a "virtual community" loved by many domestic sports enthusiasts, the group *Sports Without Circle* has created a "pure land" for a group of Internet users who have certain sports

expertise, more customs and enthusiasm for sports and yearn for a certain freedom of speech, which has a certain social value to promote sports and sports culture dissemination. The high threshold of the Douban group itself makes it difficult to access the navy and the war account, which maintains the stability of the group's internal speeches to a certain extent. However, under the high threshold, it will inevitably cause the Douban group to create a utopia for sports fans, and at the same time, it is doomed not to achieve popularity in the true sense. According to the *Point Data*, in the APP search rankings in China, compared with the 8th place in the short video APP TikTok, Douban ranked 298th, and the daily activity is not in the same order as the former.

The harmonious development of Douban virtual community depends on the joint efforts of Douban's official platform, group administrators and team members. Under the impact of new media, it is not easy for the Douban group to maintain this activity without a circle in sports, but it is visible to the naked eye that under the rectification of the overall environment, its sustainable and stable development in the future is always a problem to face. The author also feels certain limitations and difficulties in the process of writing and consulting materials, and cannot help but ask whether the group *Sports Without Circle* can still occupy a "place" in the rapidly changing public opinion environment in the future. We should pay more attention to the future development of Douban Group.

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