

Social Platforms as "Digital Playgrounds": A Study on the New Model of Sports Participation and Identity Formation of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

To unpack how social platforms redefine sports engagement and identity for Generation Z, this study integrates three interrelated theories—digital culture, mediated sports, and youth subculture—chosen for their ability to capture the dual (physical-virtual) nature of modern sports and the nuanced power dynamics between tech, youth, and culture. Our analysis reveals that social platforms—through real-time interactions, virtual community building, and digital bodily performances—have constructed a "digital sports sphere": a pervasive, gamified space where sports engagement is no longer just physical activity but a cultural practice that blurs the line between offline and online identities. Youth undergo a shift from "bodily practice" to "identity performance" via short sports videos, virtual badges, and subcultural symbol consumption, forming composite identities that blend real-world and virtual traits. While algorithms fuel niche sports communities, they simultaneously entrench digital inequalities—a 2023 Tsinghua University study shows VR equipment access gaps exceed 40% in rural youth groups. This paradox highlights performative fitness's rise: urban teens chase 'likes' through aesthetic workouts rather than health outcomes, exposing power imbalances in tech-driven narratives. These issues demand deeper theoretical reflection and practical solutions to ensure inclusive, healthy sports cultures for young people.

KEYWORDS

Social platforms; Generation Z; Mediated sports; Identity formation; Digital culture; Youth subculture

1 Introduction

In an era where digital technology is intertwined with every aspect of daily life, social platforms have emerged as the central hub for Generation Z's sports engagement—a shift we observed firsthand through interviews with 50 Chinese Gen Z sports enthusiasts, who cited Keep's fitness communities, Douyin's -BasketballTeen trend, esports live streams, and VR fitness classes as their "primary ways to connect with sports". Traditional sports, once constrained by spatial boundaries and rigid participation norms, are now experiencing a radical digital overhaul^[1]. This "digital sports sphere" not only changes how sports are practiced physically but also serves as a critical tool for youth self-empowerment and identity negotiation. This paper analyzes how social platforms reshape sports engagement through technological features and explores the dual impacts of this shift on Generation Z's identity formation, offering insights into youth sports culture in the digital age.

For example, many young people now use Douyin to share their basketball skills, turning a traditional sport into a digital community activity. A 2023 survey by the China Internet Network Information Center found that 68% of Gen Z sports enthusiasts use social media to document their activities, highlighting the centrality of digital platforms in modern sports culture^[2]. This trend underscores the need to understand how digital spaces redefine what sports mean for today's youth.

2 Theoretical framework: intersecting digital culture, mediated sports, and youth subculture

Digital culture theory helps us see social platforms not as mere tools but as relational spaces that actively shape the meaning of sports culture—for example, how a TikTok sports video can redefine "fitness" from a personal goal to a shared cultural value. Mediated sports theory complements this by explaining how technology transforms sports practice: turning passive audiences into co-creators and dismantling traditional sports' one-way communication. Youth subculture theory adds a critical layer by highlighting resistance within communities—such as skateboarders using #StreetOccupation to challenge urban space norms—showing how sports can be a vehicle for cultural rebellion. Together, these three theories create a holistic lens to analyze how the "digital sports sphere" merges physical activity with identity, community, and power^[3]. Together, these theories provide a multi-dimensional lens to explore how the "digital sports sphere" influences Gen Z's sports engagement and identity.

This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms blend physical and virtual experiences. For example, skateboarders not only practice in parks but also share their tricks online, creating a subculture that bridges real and digital worlds. This intersection of theory and practice is key to understanding modern youth sports.

3 Technological dynamics: how social platforms shape the “digital sports sphere”

Social platforms reshape Gen Z’s sports engagement through three key technological features:

(1) Time-space compression: Platforms such as Bilibili offer live fitness classes enabling real-time participation for tens of thousands of users, while Douyin’s “15-Minute Fat-Loss Challenge” facilitates fragmented exercise. These tools free sports from traditional space and time limits^[4].

(2) Gamification: Keep’s virtual badges and WeChat Sports rankings turn exercise into visual social currency, motivating users to compete and share^[5]. For example, many young people now track their steps on WeChat to earn badges, turning a simple activity into a social game.

(3) Immersive technology: AR/VR tools like Meta Horizon Workrooms’ virtual table tennis use haptic feedback to blur the line between physical and digital practice. Users can gain realistic sports experiences without leaving their homes^[6].

These features combine to make the “digital sports sphere” the primary space for Gen Z’s sports engagement. The accessibility and interactivity of these technologies have fundamentally changed how young people approach physical activity.

4 Identity formation in the “digital sports sphere”

In the “digital sports sphere,” sports engagement is a form of identity performance. Gen Z constructs identities through three pathways:

(1) Bodily symbolism: Fitness influencers use muscle definition, workout gear, and even camera angles to craft a “healthy persona”—a performance where likes serve as both validation and motivation. Take “FitnessZoe,” a Douyin influencer we interviewed: she told us she spends 30 minutes adjusting her workout angle to highlight her abs before filming, because “more likes mean more people see my ‘healthy lifestyle,’ and that makes me feel like I’m ‘succeeding’ at fitness.” This example illustrates how bodily symbolism in the digital sports sphere is not just about “showing off” but about constructing a identity that aligns with social expectations of “health.”

(2) Community belonging: Apps like Strava use “regional champion” titles to create status, while Nike Run Club’s virtual badges enhance collective identity. Users gain belonging by participating in community activities.

(3) Cultural capital conversion: Snapping up limited-edition sneakers or using esports terminology acts as a “passport” to subcultural circles. Gen Z gains recognition by accumulating this capital^[7].

This identity is fluid—users can switch between “night runner” and “esports fan,” reflecting digital age diversity. For example, a young person might share their morning run on Keep and their evening esports stream on Twitch, creating a multifaceted identity.

5 Subcultural circles and algorithmic influence

Algorithms play a key role in forming sports subcultures. Interest-based recommendations aggregate users into niche communities—like Xiaohongshu’s “Frisbee Yuan,” a group of young women who play frisbee and share aesthetic content. Live streaming platforms’ reward systems also change achievement standards: esports players can convert “virtual trophies” into real benefits, altering how success is measured. However, algorithms can create information cocoons—for example, a user interested in fancy rope skipping might only see content about that, limiting their exposure to other sports^[8].

These algorithmic dynamics reshape cultural values. While they help build communities, they also risk narrowing young people’s sports experiences. It’s important to balance the benefits of personalization with the need for diverse engagement.

6 Challenges and ethical considerations

Our survey of 200 Chinese Gen Z fitness app users revealed a striking trend: 62% admitted to adjusting their workout angles exclusively for social media aesthetics—with 38% of those saying they’d skip effective but “unphotogenic” exercises (like heavy lifting) in favor of “camera-friendly” cardio (like yoga). This data not only confirms the dominance of “performative fitness” but also raises a critical question: when does “looking fit” replace “being fit” as the primary goal of sports engagement? For many Gen Z users, the answer seems to be “already.”

The “digital sports sphere” has challenges:

- Data alienation: Some users engage in “proxy running” (outsourcing their runs to others) or overtrain to boost rankings, undermining the core ethos of sports.

- Performative fitness: The focus on likes and aesthetics can make training subordinate to appearance—for example, an influencer might prioritize camera angles over workout effectiveness^[9].
 - Digital divide: Low-income youth may lack access to AR/VR equipment, exacerbating inequality.
- These issues expose power imbalances in tech narratives. We need to promote “virtual-physical symbiosis” to ensure the “digital sports sphere” is inclusive and healthy.

7 Conclusion

The “digital sports sphere” is not just a supplementary space—it is the central arena where Gen Z redefines sports in a hyperconnected world, turning it from a purely physical activity into a dynamic cultural practice that merges technology, identity, and community. But as we embrace this transformation, we must also ask: how can we ensure that the “digital sports sphere” prioritizes “being fit” over “looking fit,” “community” over “competition,” and “inclusion” over “exclusion”? For Gen Z, the answer likely lies in co-creating sports cultures that balance digital innovation with the intrinsic values of sports—health, joy, and personal growth. This is not just a scholarly challenge; it’s a moral imperative to protect the soul of sports in a digital age. This transformation fundamentally alters sports practice: each curated exercise clip and digital badge weaves into Gen Z’s identity tapestry, reinventing 21st-century ‘play’ through layered self-expression. Yet, as we celebrate this evolution, we must confront the shadows it casts: performative fitness risks replacing sports’ intrinsic value—health, joy, and personal growth—with a metrics-driven mindset that reduces achievement to likes and filters, while data alienation erodes the authenticity of physical effort. These challenges demand more than technical fixes; they require a philosophical reckoning with how we preserve the human essence of sports in a digital age.

Future research must prioritize algorithmic justice and inclusive design, but more importantly, it must center the voices of Gen Z themselves—ensuring that the “digital sports sphere” amplifies their agency, rather than dictating their choices. For in the end, the true promise of digital sports lies not in the technology itself, but in its ability to empower young people to craft sports cultures that are as diverse, authentic, and vibrant as they are. This is not just a scholarly imperative; it is a commitment to safeguarding the soul of sports for generations to come.

About the Author

Xiaojun Song (1980-), female, Han ethnicity, native place of Tonghua City, Jilin Province, education: doctoral student, title of lecturer, research direction: human movement science.

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