

Research on the Construction Strategy of National Identity of Naturalized Athletes from the Perspective of Fan Network Discourse Activism

Zhen Li^{1,2}

¹*School of Physical Education and Sports Science, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, 510006, Guangdong, China*

²*Guangdong Institute of Physical Education and Sports, Guangzhou, 510663, Guangdong, China*

Abstract: *In the context of globalization, the cross-border flow of sports talents is becoming increasingly frequent, and naturalized athletes have become an undeniable force on the international sports stage. However, due to cultural differences and identity issues, naturalized athletes often face practical difficulties such as low social acceptance and weak national identity. This article takes naturalized Chinese short track speed skating athletes as an example, based on in-depth interviews and grounded theory construction, to explore how fan groups use online discourse activism strategies to promote public national identity towards naturalized athletes. Research has found that fans enhance the emotional connection and national identity of naturalized athletes by constructing social and political belonging narratives, emphasizing cultural proximity, behavioral neutrality, and ethnic group legitimacy. The research results not only provide a new perspective for understanding sports nationalism, but also provide strategic recommendations for naturalized athletes on how to establish identity recognition in the new cultural system. At the same time, they also contribute theoretical basis for how to manage naturalization policies at the national level to promote the development of sports.*

Keywords: *Naturalized Athletes; Fan Culture; Network Discourse Activism; Ethnic Identity; Chinese Ownership Narrative*

1. Introduction

Sports competitions are of great significance in building national identity and strengthening national emotions. They not only encourage countrymen to pursue sports, but also encourage them to strive for the development of the motherland[12]. The public's attention to athletes in international competitions is not only about their performance, but also includes an examination of the national spirit and stance they represent[2].

In the context of cultural globalization, athletes' cross-border mobility is frequent, and the phenomenon of naturalization is becoming increasingly popular[9]. However, due to blood ties and cultural differences, the public tends to view naturalized athletes as "outsiders"[13]. In addition, competition with local athletes makes it difficult for the public to form a broad and lasting national identity, weakening their role in inspiring national spirit and consolidating national strength.

Mainstream media guides the public to establish identification with naturalized athletes through discourse such as ethnic identity, sportsmanship, and commercialism [2]. Social media memory collaborates with official memory, and fans in the folk memory field are active producers of naturalized athletes' social memory. As a link between athletes and the public, their cultural capital is often superior to mainstream media[18], and content production is carried out through organized "fan clubs"[8] to showcase the good image of naturalized athletes[19]. Therefore, building public national identity for naturalized athletes requires the assistance of fan groups.

Existing research rarely explores the impact of fan perspectives on the construction of national identity among naturalized athletes. This study takes naturalized short track speed skaters as an example, and explores key strategies for fan groups to strengthen their Chinese identity narrative through in-depth interviews and the construction of grounded theory[10]. This can expand the boundaries of related research in academia, and provide reference for athlete image construction, sports field management, and public opinion environment maintenance at the social level.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Methods and Data Collection

Qualitative research, as a research method emphasizing the process, is suitable for exploring the strategies adopted by fans in promoting public ethnic identity towards naturalized athletes[1]. In addition, in-depth interviews can obtain the interviewee's deeper perspectives, feelings, and experiences, which is conducive to further exploring the discourse and action information of more fans on online platforms, and is crucial for the subsequent construction of theories[5].

Therefore, this article adopts qualitative research methods. From May to June 2024, interviewees were recruited on platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. A total of 12 interviewees were interviewed in depth, with an average personal interview time of 80 minutes. Due to regional limitations, interviews are mainly conducted through online voice interviews. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Respondent Information

number	sex	record of formal schooling	age
interviewee A	woman	Master's degree in progress	24
interviewee B	woman	undergraduate course	36
interviewee C	woman	undergraduate course	34
interviewee D	woman	Not revealed	Not disclosed
interviewee E	woman	Not revealed	20
interviewee F	woman	Master	42
interviewee G	woman	Not revealed	Not revealed
interviewee H	woman	Undergraduate student	20
interviewee I	woman	Master	25
interviewee J	woman	Master	Not revealed

Researchers have developed three interview outlines (see Appendix 1) for fans of Lin Xiaodong, Liu Shaolin, Liu Shaoang, and both parties' casual fans. The interview focuses on three aspects: fans' experiences and strategies of liking and supporting naturalized athletes, their responses to naturalization controversies, and their attitudes towards opposing athletes and naturalized athlete groups. After each interview, transcribe the recording and create the original analysis text for each interviewee, ultimately obtaining over 200000 words of original text. Researchers study and analyze interview records, closely follow the theme to improve the outline, explore core concepts, and prepare for model construction. After all interviews are completed, integrate all original records again for subsequent coding analysis and model building. In operation, the encoding and classification functions of the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA.20 are utilized to efficiently process data, while Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory is used to qualitatively analyze the results, in order to clearly construct a network discourse activism strategy for fans to promote public recognition of naturalized athletes' ethnic identity.

2.2 Coding Analysis Based on Grounded Theory

2.2.1 Initial Coding

Initial coding is the initial stage of the coding process, also known as open coding, which is an operational process of "crushing" and "breaking" data into conceptual labels, and then recombining them in new ways to define concepts and discover categories. The researchers imported all 12 interview records into MAXQDA.20 software, and after multiple readings, gathered the questions and classified the initial concepts hidden in the text based on similar, causal, and other relationship types to construct categories. In the end, a total of 1811 initial concepts were abstracted.

2.2.2 Focused Coding

Focused encoding is an extension of the initial encoding, which is more directional and conceptual. At this stage, researchers conducted in-depth interpretation of the 1811 initial codes obtained from the previous operation and explored their logical relationships. This study summarized 30 focus codes, including "blood consistency", "strength superiority", "ethnic group legality", etc., and explained their specific connotations to prepare for theoretical construction.

2.2.3 Theoretical Coding

Theoretical coding is an advanced stage of the coding process, whose main purpose is to refine the core categories and concretize the possible relationships between the main categories obtained by focusing on coding, making the analysis logic more coherent[3]. At this stage, researchers further analyzed, compared, and summarized 30 focused codes, and traced back to the research topic, ultimately exploring the theoretical model of the core category "fans' network discourse activism strategy to promote public national identity of naturalized athletes".

3. Research Results - Strengthening the Narrative of Chinese Belonging for Athletes Who Transform Their Ethnic Group

The research results found that fans mainly promote the public's establishment of ethnic identity towards athletes who have changed their ethnic group by strengthening the narrative of their Chinese affiliation. There are two core narrative strategies adopted by fans under the Chinese belongingness narrative: social belongingness narrative and political belongingness narrative[4].

3.1 Narrative of Social Belonging

Fans construct the Chinese national identity and sports leader identity of transfer athletes, completing their narrative of social belonging to them. Specifically, fans mainly construct the national identity of transfer athletes and shape identity similarity by creating cultural proximity, emphasizing blood consistency, and highlighting behavioral neutrality; This study emphasizes the contribution of naturalized athletes to the development of the corresponding sports field through their outstanding performance and adaptability to competition styles, highlighting their irreplaceability and importance in building the identity of sports leaders, and strengthening the necessity of identity.

3.1.1 Repositioning of Chinese National Identity

The repositioning of Chinese national identity is an important social narrative strategy adopted by fans to emphasize the Chinese identity of athletes who have changed their ethnic group[6]. Its purpose is to reshape the social characteristics of these athletes as Chinese nationals, reconstruct their images, and gain public recognition. Fans mainly reposition their identity from three dimensions: localization of attributes, blood consistency, and behavioral neutrality. Specifically, they use local culture, emphasize Chinese ancestry, showcase athletes' positive attitudes towards China, and integrate with local athletes to construct their Chinese national identity[7].

In terms of attribute localization, Anthony Smith believes that "nation" is not only a legal and political community, but also a community based on origin and original culture. Chinese national identity transcends ethnic group and forms a strong sense of cultural identity. American scholar Straubah proposed the concept of "cultural proximity", which refers to the audience being more likely to accept programs with similar cultures. Guo Zhenzhi pointed out that its premise is the presence of similar or identical cultural factors. Localization of attributes refers to fans combining the experiences of naturalized athletes with Chinese local culture, or interpreting the symbolic values of local athletes, which can form cultural closeness, improve empathy, and make it easier for the public to accept their reconstructed national identity. On the one hand, fans use classic expressions of Chinese local culture to describe the past of naturalized athletes and build emotional identification. This is because the expression of talented heroes in traditional culture can be projected onto competitive powerhouses, triggering resonance and enhancing emotional identification; On the other hand, fans will pair naturalized athletes with local athletes to form CP, bind the value of transfer symbols, narrow the psychological distance, and strengthen the rationality of national identity.

Blood lineage consistency is an important element in determining the identity of athletes who have transferred their ethnic group, as blood lineage is the core of the Chinese national identity concept. Fans highlight the consanguinity between athletes and the Chinese people through emphasis and comparison, so as to gain national recognition. Specifically, by emphasizing the strong connection between consanguinity and emotion and the Chinese tradition of kinship, fans strengthen social belonging and clarify their non Chinese "others". One is to emphasize the naturalized athletes' own bloodline, highlighting their sincerity towards China. This patriotism based on bloodline is more natural and sincere, easily perceived by the public, and makes their national identity more easily accepted; The second is to compare the blood characteristics of athletes who have transferred their ethnic group from other fields, to support their Chinese kinship background, and to use this proximity

to Chinese culture to rationalize the Chinese national identity of athletes who have transferred their ethnic group.

Behavioral neutrality is another important dimension for identifying naturalized athletes, as behavior is a direct external manifestation that reflects the athlete's inner self. Fans highlight athletes' actions of getting close to China through personal experiences or online observations, striving for national identity. Specifically, by showcasing athletes' attitudes towards China and their relationship with local athletes, they demonstrate their sense of belonging to China and construct their identity as a Chinese nation. On the one hand, it focuses on showcasing athletes' positive statements off the field, reflecting their support for China and their inner closeness to China; On the other hand, showcasing the relationship between naturalized athletes and local athletes reflects their degree of integration into the Chinese local environment and their closeness to China in terms of compatibility[11].

It can be seen that fans effectively respond to cultural exclusion and identity questioning that transfer athletes may encounter from three levels: symbolic, physiological, and behavioral. They help them achieve social identity repositioning by shaping imagined communities and building individual identity, completing social belonging narratives.

3.1.2 Identity Construction of Chinese Sports Leaders

Fans of short track speed skaters who have transferred to China seek to gain more social recognition by constructing the identity of naturalized athletes as Chinese sports leaders, in order to integrate them into the big family of Chinese sports. This is another specific narrative approach under the social belonging narrative strategy. Fans mainly focus on highlighting the superior performance and adaptability of naturalized athletes, emphasizing their contributions to the development of China's sports industry, and incorporating them into the framework of "sports heroes" to dilute their original ethnic group and modern citizenship[12].

Naturalized athletes need to possess outstanding competitive skills in order to be accepted by the local public. Fans will selectively emphasize the outstanding strength of athletes, highlight their outstanding contributions to the relevant sports fields in China, and construct their irreplaceability and necessity. Firstly, emphasis should be placed on the superior strength of naturalized athletes before naturalization and the needs of our country, in order to rationalize the transfer of ethnic group. Interviewee K believes that Lin Xiaodong's naturalization is similar to talent introduction, and similar to Gu Ailing's situation, both of which are achievements that the country needs in related projects. In response to the lack of strong athletes in China's short track speed skating field, fans emphasize the strength of Lin Xiaodong and the Liu brothers, as well as the demand for short track events in our country. They often showcase their superior strength and important value through the country's investment in them. Secondly, comparing naturalized athletes with local athletes highlights their superior strength. As mentioned by interviewee B, young domestic athletes Sun Long and Liu Shaoang are of similar age, but there is a significant gap in personal abilities, honors, and medal counts. This comparison highlights the strength of naturalized athletes, allowing them to integrate into the team as leaders, gain more social recognition, and reduce opposition voices. Finally, we take advantage of the positive coverage of the abilities of naturalized athletes by mainstream media to strengthen their strengths.

Highlighting the adaptability of naturalized athletes' competitive styles to Chinese sports teams is the foundation for constructing their leadership identity. Fans demonstrate the adaptability of transfer athletes to the Chinese national team in terms of competition style, proving that they can integrate well into the team, and integration is a prerequisite for becoming a leader. The South Korean short track speed skating team has been criticized by the Chinese public for allegedly disrespecting their opponents. Fans often highlight Lin Xiaodong's clean style of competition, which is compatible with the Chinese national team's "clean gold medal" style, proving that although he was once a member of the South Korean team, he could truly integrate into the Chinese sports team.

When naturalized athletes represent China in competitions, they are a symbol of a strong national image, but their identity may not be accepted by the entire Chinese public, so fans strive to gain a higher degree of social recognition for them. Sports are an important way to build various social identities, and in this study, fans are based on this. By highlighting the athletes' superior strength and adaptability to the competition style, they construct the identity of Chinese sports leaders as transfer athletes, and promote their acquisition of more social identities.

3.2 Political Affiliation Narrative

Scholars such as Shi Yibin have pointed out that through the knowledge production of netizens and the viral dissemination of social media, netizens have begun to rapidly construct symbolic meanings and form alliances with emerging political opportunities, continuously spreading and amplifying the political implications of events[14]. This study also found that fans will use political and objective arguments, such as the legitimacy of ethnic group, citizenship in the political sense, and national policies to endorse athletes' behavior of changing ethnic group. The objectivity of these evidences and countrymen's perception of their authority enhance the effectiveness of such strategies.

3.2.1 Legitimacy of Ethnic Group

Fans of naturalized athletes will use the established fact that athletes have Chinese ethnic group as their argument to maintain their image, clarify the focus of their image display, and shift the focus of the debate. They believe that naturalized athletes already have Chinese ethnic group, which is an objective fact, and there is no need to argue about their identity. When showcasing the image of athletes, the focus should also be on their personal charm. Secondly, fans will deliberately place the debate about transferring athletes under the premise that the athletes already have Chinese ethnic group and repeatedly emphasize this point, thereby shifting the focus of the debate away from the identity of the athletes.

We have acquiesced that its current ethnic group is Chinese. It seems unnecessary for us to use the mindset of being inclusive and open-minded. I think the most that this athlete may want to showcase is his personal charm.

——Interviewee

Similarly, the above viewpoint is at the core of many debates about naturalized athletes, that is, the identity of naturalized athletes, which breaks away from the existing debate framework and forces the other party to no longer focus on the Chinese ethnic group of the transferred athletes, but on their personal charm and outstanding strength.

3.2.2 Construction of Discourse Authority-national Policies

Fans use national policies to endorse their words in order to enhance their authority. The authenticity of the policy of presenting favorable content for naturalized athletes to maintain their image and attract opposing athletes is still unknown, but the audience will have a natural sense of authority towards it. Fans use this perception to rationalize athletes' transfer behavior. Fans will point out the different attitudes of national policies towards blood based naturalization and naturalization to prove the rationality of one approach, thereby promoting the establishment of national identity among naturalized athletes who have adopted this method.

Our current national policy is that if you naturalize as an athlete, you must have Chinese bloodline before you can change your ethnic group. For example, someone like Xiaolin who simply changes their ethnic group should not happen in the short term in the future.

——Interviewee

The policy corresponding to the above viewpoint has not been officially confirmed. Fans only use the name of official policy to provide seemingly authoritative official evidence for naturalized athletes, but in fact, the evidence itself is false. But when the audience sees words such as "policy", they will be "intimidated" by its natural authority, and thus be forced to establish a national identity for athletes who are naturalized by blood, such as Liu Shaolin and Liu Shaoang. It can be seen that fans emphasize the civic obligations of naturalized athletes, weaken their experience of changing ethnic group, and even speculate on the attitudes and policies of the country towards different transfer methods to highlight the prerequisite of the legitimacy of naturalized athletes' ethnic group and construct its authority. By spreading and amplifying the political implications of transfer, they complete the narrative of political belonging[17].

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As a free national entity, the Chinese nation has formed a national identity concept centered on blood and culture. Sports, as a cultural activity, can shape imaginative communities and construct individual identity[15]. Therefore, this study delves into how fans shape the public's ethnic identity

towards transfer athletes, and finds that they mainly use two narrative methods, social and political belonging narratives, to narrate the Chinese identity of transfer athletes[16].

In the narrative of social belonging, fans mainly start from three perspectives: blood ties, localization, and the necessity of competitive strength, and strengthen their national identity by constructing the Chinese national identity and the identity of Chinese sports leaders of transfer athletes. In the narrative of political affiliation, fans mainly construct discourse authority by emphasizing the legitimacy of Chinese ethnic group and national policies of transfer athletes, highlighting their political sense of belonging to China.

The research findings of this article can provide reference for transfer athletes to construct their own image and better integrate into China, mainstream media, and fans to strengthen their national identity in sports and maintain a healthy public opinion environment in the sports field. However, there are also certain limitations: firstly, due to the limited representativeness of the interviewees, there is less information obtained about political affiliation narratives, and the content is relatively weak. Subsequently, the interview outline will be revised four times to include questions about political affiliation, and more targeted information will be obtained to further improve the research results; Secondly, there are certain differences between the digital discourse activism strategies of fans of Lin Xiaodong and the Liu brothers in shaping public perception of their ethnic identity. This study did not conduct a thorough analysis of the reasons for these differences, which will be the focus of future research.

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