Buddy Social Interaction: The Narrative Picture and Practical Path of Youth Sports from the Perspective of Role Theory

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Abstract: *In the quasi-mimetic environment where digital media and the real space blend and co-construct, the empowerment of technology has given rise to innovative forms of youth sports social practice. By approaching the "buddy social interaction" in sports from the perspective of role theory, we can decrypt its "front-stage" aspects and analyze the reasons for its popularity. This mainly involves the individual's role expectations and the adjustment of role conflicts. These three elements jointly influence the transformation of the ways in which young people engage in sports, and thus outline the narrative picture of youth sports social interaction: the shift in role concepts from "other-oriented" to "self-identification" reflects the change in role behaviors from the "in-group tribe" to the "social expanse". In order to respond to the identity transformation demands of the youth group in sports participation and explore the possible extensions of the "back-stage" of sports activities, we can start from the interaction between individuals and communities and the cultural orientation of individual embedding. We should rationally view the construction, interaction, and embedding of the roles of young people in sports, and expand the socialization paths for youth sports participation.*

Keywords: *Buddy Social Interaction, Role Theory, Youth Sports, Narrative Picture*

1. Introduction

In the current era of media modernization, youth social interaction is undergoing a paradigm shift from "strong tie dependency" to "weak emotional symbiosis." New forms of sports-related social interaction, represented by "fitness buddies" and "travel buddies," have successfully gained popularity and become important entry points for decoding the social interaction patterns of youth sports. According to survey data from China Youth Daily in 2023, 72.6% of surveyed youth accept "buddy social interaction," with sports buddies accounting for 38.9%, reflecting the tremendous influence of sports in the field of youth subculture. Existing research either focuses on buddy social interaction itself, analyzing its connotative characteristics, logical generation, and development directions, including discussions on "contemporary youth's self-focus and expression at the micro-level of sports participation"[1] and "youth groups' emphasis on personal boundary senses in self-expression"[2]; or examines the impact of digital media development on the transformation of youth sports participation, such as "smart sports facilities and platforms jointly promoting youth sports participation"[3]; or adopts qualitative analysis methods like in-depth interviews and participatory observation to analyze the buddy phenomenon; or explores it from social concepts, psychology, or communication behavior theory. This type of research follows the perspectives of the aforementioned papers, exploring the emotional and psychological demands in youth sports participation aspirations. This paper attempts to introduce role theory within the framework of symbolic interactionism to deconstruct the implied "front-stage" popularity reasons, narrative pictures, and "back-stage" practical paths of "buddy social interaction" in youth sports, thereby revealing how it reconstructs the rules of interpersonal interaction in the context of social acceleration.

2. Buddy Social Interaction: Decoding the "Front-Stage" of Youth Sports

2.1 Role Expectations and Conflicts: Achieving Group Companionship in Identity Construction

Based on Cooley's "Looking-Glass Self," Mead discusses "social role theory" in his book *Mind, Self, and Society*, further distinguishing between the "I" (as the acting subject) and the "Me" (as social

evaluation). Mead views roles as self-cognition arising from individual interaction with others in social situations[4]. Among them, the "I" exists as an unobjectified subjectivity, embodying instantaneous reactions and creative potential.

From the perspective of role expectations, when seeking sports buddies, youth anticipate, reshaping, and re-cognition of the self. Individuals may initially self-position based on sports skills in the initial stages of buddy sports participation, such as being a "skilled player" or an "organizational team member." As social interaction deepens, more comprehensive role cognition gradually develops, such as becoming an "atmosphere activator." This construction process has significant interactive features, with instant feedback from sports buddies, adjustments in team status hierarchies, and the evaluation system of sports communities continuously reshaping individuals' role cognition maps. On the other hand, due to the instability and transience of "weak ties," youth unconsciously adopt differentiated behavior patterns for sports scenarios, such as playing the role of a "listener" in jogging but transforming into a "coach" in basketball matches. Facing different scenarios, crowd personalities, interests, and preferences, individuals inevitably adjust their self-expectations within the horizon of role expectations, more comprehensively learning to align with the "I."

From the perspective of role conflicts, each individual youth obtains group companionship through social interaction, but this companionship is temporary and aggregative. Currently, youth groups are exhausted by dealing with daily interpersonal relationships, reflecting their role conflict between "actively seeking buddy social interaction" and "avoiding real-life communication." Therefore, they hope to avoid potential conflict relationships through temporary light social interaction, thereby reducing social costs. This type of "strong boundary sense" in social relationships essentially reflects youth's disorientation and group loneliness in the media environment driven by technology. Consequently, while fulfilling role expectations and resolving role conflicts, youth can only rely more closely on technology to explore more social opportunities and possibilities.

2.2 Role Coordination and Integration: Exploring Breakthroughs in the Differential Mode of Association

Facing expectations and conflicts in the self-cognition process, youth still use buddy social interaction in sports for continuous role coordination, thus achieving role integration and breakthroughs in a cyclical manner. As social molecules, individuals must change alongside the deep-seated transformations of social structures in the process of modernization. The rural society dominated by the differential mode of association relies on stable geographical ties to form continuous interaction networks. However, the mobility characteristics of modern society lead to "temporal-spatial disembedding" in social relationships. The rupture of traditional geographical ties and the mobility of urban living spaces have led to the "severance of kinship ties" among youth groups.

On the other hand, as youth's social interactions, ages, and cognitions change, individuals become increasingly unique in the process of modernization and need to continuously integrate and adjust themselves to integrate into the flood of the information society. Therefore, among the differential mode of association constructed from the temporal-spatial intersection, sports have become a special field for youth to reconstruct their social networks. The social interactions provided by the differential mode of association transform into a vivid reflection of the establishment of interest-based communities in sports scenarios. Youth interest-based groups in sports vary in occupations, identities, ages, and other dimensions, but through buddy social interaction, they achieve capital spillovers after self-cognition and provide possibilities for obtaining more intangible resources.

Furthermore, the characteristics of sports provide immediacy for physical interaction, which necessitates youth buddies breaking through the sensory limitations of digital social interaction and using non-verbal communication (bodily collaboration, facial expression interaction) in sports to rebuild embodied social trust. This serves as a way for them to cope with anxiety, dissolve loneliness, and obtain emotional support[5]. In this process of symbolic interaction, youth groups continuously self-adjust and integrate to break through existing self-cognition and achieve brand-new role reshaping. Due to the strangeness brought by light social interaction, the interaction field formed by temporary buddies can provide youth with the possibility to casually play roles, thereby obtaining contact with emerging "personas" and cultural interaction through physical movement and stretching.

3. Buddy Social Interaction: The Narrative Picture of Youth Sports

3.1 Role Concepts: Transition from "Other-Oriented Identification" to "Self-Identification"

Under the structural pressure of the modern meritocratic society, youth groups face a crisis of deep differentiation between social and individual personalities. Traditional sports communication principles emphasize teamwork and coordination. "Buddy social interaction" allows youth to evade these traditional expectations, thereby developing a new channel to evade utilitarian and exhausting real life and release negative emotions. As individuals, youth pay more attention to their subjectivity. This is essentially a mechanism constructed by youth to release institutionalized emotions in response to the multiple disciplines of the performance society. Through temporary, low-cost social interaction, individuals can break through the dilemma of "emotional viscosity" in acquaintance societies in stranger contexts, achieve ritualized venting of negative emotions in shallow interactions with clear boundaries, and focus more on their intrinsic experiences and feelings.

It is noteworthy that the psychological intervention mechanism of "buddy social interaction" exhibits obvious characteristics of identification hierarchical leaps. When individuals continuously receive positive feedback from others in sporadic social interactions, the accumulation of quantitative changes will trigger a qualitative reconstruction of the self-cognition system. This transition from external identification to internal appreciation essentially breaks through the cognitive shackles of "other gaze." By focusing on oneself during sports activities with buddies, "other needs" give way to "self-needs," thereby entering the role transformation process of the identification subject and ultimately achieving a cognitive leap from social role-playing to subjective awakening.

This transformation process encompasses profound paradoxes of modernity: As the atomized society dismantles traditional identification systems, "buddy social interaction" serves both as passive adaptation to the failure of institutionalized social interaction and as active exploration for subjects to reconstruct identification mechanisms. Through these temporary sports activities grounded in transient shared interests, youth essentially engage in flexible identity strategies constructed amidst liquid modernity. Its value lies not only in providing an emotional buffer zone but also in assisting individuals to piece together a complete self-image through low-risk identity trial-and-error within the fragmented reflections of the "mirror of others." The evolutionary trajectory of this social interaction model reflects the paradigm shift in identity construction during the digital era—transitioning from stable identity affiliations to fluid self-narratives, and from passive acceptance of social discipline to active articulation of subjective value.

3.2 Role Behavior: From "In-Group Tribe" to "Social Expanse"

By seizing agency, youth groups utilize sports activities to dismantle the closure of "in-group tribes" amid the process where digital technologies deconstruct traditional social paradigms. This socially-driven transformation through physical practice constitutes a cognitive revolution in which subjects reproduce social spaces via embodied actions, with its evolutionary trajectory exhibiting a distinct leap from closed interest-based aggregations to open social networks. Sports communities demonstrate the characteristic of "weak ties with strong connections"—emerging sports such as frisbee, cycling, and hiking often see participants forming primary social units based on fragmented interests, with interaction modes governed by the provisional contractual principles of "buddy social interaction". This construction of in-group tribes centered on "emotional compensation" indeed provides initial relief to the existential anxiety of atomized individuals.

Notably, as the refinement of athletic skills and the empowerment of digital technologies drive the continuous expansion of interest territories, the social composition structure of subjects undergoes fundamental mutations. Taking Guizhou's "Village Super League" as an example, what originated as fragmented "buddy interactions" has evolved through villagers' new media accessibility and media empowerment, synergizing local traditional media resources to conduct media practices that articulate, construct, and propel rural societal development[6]. Consequently, within interest-geographical associations, individual roles witness the gradual outward expansion of inherent interest-based in-groups, continuously absorbing media practices, industrial integration, and traffic monetization. This technologically mediated social reorganization enables sports communities to transcend the insularity of traditional interest-based groups, evolving toward the "social expanse" as complex network structures. Simultaneously, individual roles achieve enhancements in athletic competencies and self-efficacy through this process.

Furthermore, the diverse manifestations of sports activities endow the social expanse shaped by cities with unique functions for cultivating public value. When street dance communities engage in urban spatial reconfiguration through flash mobs, and eco-conscious running groups integrate waste-collecting routines into fitness trails, physical practices ascend into training grounds for civic consciousness. This sublimation from individual interests to public participation validates the possibility of a reverse breakthrough of the "colonization of the lifeworld" in Habermas's theory of communicative action. The "buddy cooperation networks" formed among youth through sports socialization demonstrate that sustaining a healthy society requires not only preserving the emotional buffer function of in-group tribes, but also fostering the ecological diversity of the social expanse.

4. Buddy Socialization: Restoring Sports to Their Fundamental Social Role

4.1 Role Interactions: Youth and Community in Collaborative Synergy

In the ecological context of seeking buddies, youth begin by mapping their personal interests and proceed to gather like-minded individuals, thereby becoming ensnared in the dilemma of "information cocoons"[7]. Specifically, closed social circles with homogenized information flows act as key drivers propelling young people toward information cocoons within buddy socialization. The algorithmic recommendations of the digital age further cloak this predicament in technological guise. Therefore, while valuing media-mediated social participation, youth must proactively implement "reflexive management" of information intake. By constructing diversified information source matrices and cultivating critical thinking, they can persistently engage with groups possessing heterogeneous perspectives. This enables a cognitive evolution from "passive reception" to "active filtration", thereby reconstructing "digital communicative rationality". Such transformation allows youth to maintain professional depth in sports while expanding the breadth of social cognition.

On the other hand, individual efforts demonstrate notable limitations within the mediated environment immersion. The social spectacle constructed by youth in sporting activities reflects their pursuit of efficient, free, and convenient social interactions, yet simultaneously manifests "nearby escape" amidst the rapid-paced, individualized, and fluid role dynamics[8]. As a dual space encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions, communities can leverage their "place-based nature" to activate the magnetic effect of interest-based communities. This involves aggregating opportunities for youth sports engagement through diversified channels, including spatial reconstruction based on geographical transformation, relational restructuring grounded in heterogeneous individuality, and value regeneration rooted in community culture.

Thus, it appears that youth are gradually cultivating a "reclaiming proximity" self-awareness through sports engagement, enhancing their on-site participation and experiential engagement, thereby fully reintegrating embodied sports activities and communication into their real-life contexts. Communities, in turn, proactively respond to this process of youth self-awareness construction by leveraging their inherent strengths to facilitate multidimensional enhancement of youth skills, strengthen social efficacy, and progressively dismantle the notion that "proximity, as a horizon of daily life scenarios, has vanished from youth consciousness." This fosters role-based interactions between individuals and communities, ultimately achieving a two-way convergence between youth and communities in the process of sports participation.

4.2 Role Interembedding: Rectifying Cultural-Value Orientation

Habermas posits that the lifeworld can be interpreted as three dimensions: cultural/symbolic systems, social/societal institutions, and personal orientation/self-ontology. When individuals internalize role expectations and resolve role conflicts, they enter a state of stabilized role reconciliation. These three dimensions exist in an alternating spiral progression throughout youth life trajectories. While role expectations and role conflicts drive roles into interaction, role reconciliation must be embedded within the situated cultural and specific symbolic systems. The role positioning of youth in sports activities inherently reflects the interconnection between psychological states and the prevailing social structures and cultural frameworks. Currently, as young people seek "sports partners" (exercise companions), they must adhere to the principle that "humans are thinking beings: correct actions stem from correct thinking, while erroneous actions arise from erroneous thinking."

Concretely speaking, this arises from the unprecedented speed of social mobility, acceleration, or restructuring, where individuals undergo symbolic and ritualistic disembedding from urban contexts.

Consequently, youth are highly susceptible to experiencing a weakened "sense of place attachment" — the emotional bonds established between people and places becoming less evident and reliable. Currently, partner-based socializing in sports engagement generally exists in a fluid equilibrium between "advancement and retreat," yet it can also function as "simulated experiments" for intimate relationships, or even catalyze a "de-intermediatization of matchmaking" transformation in dating paradigms. Therefore, both the dissolution and positive restructuring of partner-based social relationships remain possible. Guiding youth to uphold proactive values throughout this process becomes imperative to avoid cyclical internal depletion, preventing such relationships from ultimately degrading into a "mere social instrument" exhaustively oscillating between apathy and impulsive engagement.

Building upon this foundation, embedding youth's sports roles within contemporary culturally-value-laden contexts can guide them toward "meaningful" social interactions rather than "instrumental exchanges." By employing algorithmic calculations to address youth's inner anxieties and directing them to ground their search for partners in cultural reflection and value excavation, they may attain existential meaning or upward mobility in life through self-actualization within emerging social paradigms. This could ultimately fulfill the ultimate aspiration for "partner-based socializing" to carry cultural-value DNA into each independent individual.

5. Concluding Remarks

"Promoting the harmonious physical-mental development of youth and guiding them to properly navigate relationships between individuals, collectives, and society" serves as a pivotal directive in advancing China's medium-to-long-term youth development planning. By addressing youth's role positioning, psychological expectations, and status conflicts in social interactions, sports engagement facilitates role reconciliation — breaking through "social avoidance" masked by virtualized communication and reestablishing exchanges with the objective world, thereby constructing a multi-value-oriented sports participation network. Within the narrative framework that portrays youth with "self-identity" as the subject and "social exploration" as the blueprint, this approach bridges the interembedding of individual, community, and cultural roles. Consequently, emerging social modalities like "sports partners" inject fresh vitality into sporting ecosystems and contribute youthful dynamism, serving as novel mechanisms that activate athletic vitality through next-generation social paradigms.

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