

Analysis on the Causes of the “Zero Spectators” Phenomenon in Campus Football Matches in China

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Abstract: *Based on the context of sports-education integration, this study sorts out the current situation of spectatorship in campus football matches, and deeply explores the causes of the “zero spectators” phenomenon through literature review and semi-structured interviews. The findings show that although China’s campus football competition system is complete and widely covered, the prevalent “zero spectators” phenomenon has become a major constraint restricting its development. Extensive competition organization, single promotion methods, conflicts between match time and teaching/family schedules, insufficient cultivation of football culture, as well as cognitive biases of schools and parents, jointly lead to weak appeal of matches, poor spectator access and low audience participation. In response, it is necessary to change cognition, optimize competition operation and promotion, create a football cultural atmosphere, and improve facilities and evaluation mechanisms, so as to break the “zero spectators” dilemma and promote the high-quality development of campus football.*

Keywords: Sports-education integration, Campus football, “zero spectators” phenomenon.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has issued a number of policies to continuously deepen sports-education integration. The participation scale of campus football has been expanding, and the talent training system has become increasingly mature, making it an important starting point for physical exercise of teenagers, reserve of competitive talents, and construction of campus sports culture [1]. Relying on the construction of campus football characteristic schools and the National Youth Campus Football League, matches should have become a business card of campus culture and promote teenagers to improve their sports literacy. However, in actual development, campus football matches in China are generally trapped in the “zero spectators” dilemma. Most primary and secondary school football matches are only attended by players, coaches and referees, with almost no spectators stopping to watch, which greatly reduces the influence of the matches.

To promote the high-quality development of campus football, it is imperative to solve the “zero spectators” problem. Based on the context of sports-education integration, this study sorts out the current situation of spectatorship in matches, deeply explores the superficial and deep-seated causes of the “zero spectators” phenomenon, and identifies the key issues restricting the appeal of matches. Combined with the development practice of campus football and the laws of education and teaching, feasible governance suggestions are put forward to promote the transformation of campus football from popularization to quality improvement, efficiency enhancement and cultural empowerment, help the implementation of sports-education integration, and promote the all-round development of teenagers.

2. Research Methods

This study mainly adopts the semi-structured interview method for research. This method sets a fixed framework for interview questions, while allowing interviewees to answer freely according to their actual situations, balancing the

standardization of research and the authenticity of answers, and can comprehensively explore issues related to the “zero spectators” phenomenon in campus football matches. Ten subjects related to campus football are selected as interviewees, and the main contents of consultation are as follows: (1) the willingness to watch and actual attendance at campus football matches; (2) the main factors affecting teachers, students, parents and others to watch campus football matches; (3) the impact of the “zero spectators” phenomenon in campus football matches; (4) feasible suggestions to improve the attendance of campus football matches. The interview materials are approved by the interviewees and can be used for scientific research.

To improve the quality of interviews and truly restore the actual situation of campus football matches and spectator participation, researchers sorted out relevant video materials of campus football matches in various regions in advance. Interviewees are informed in advance that the whole interview process will be recorded, and a strict promise is made to keep the personal information and interview content of the interviewees confidential, so as to dispel their concerns and ensure the truth and objectivity of the interview content.

After the interviews, under the guidance of three experts in the field of sociological research, four professionals in relevant research directions systematically coded 10 audio interview transcripts, and condensed the core meanings expressed by the interviewees with keywords. Then the contents are classified into five analysis categories: competition organization, promotion, time conflict, cultural atmosphere, and school-parent cognition.

This study uses the classification consistency index formula $CA = 2 \times S / (T1 + T2)$ (S represents the number of consistent classifications by coders, $T1$ and $T2$ represent the total number of codes by each coder) to calculate coding consistency. The coding consistency of the five categories is 0.83, 0.87, 0.80, 0.86 and 0.82 respectively, and the overall coding consistency is 0.836, which meets the research requirements.

Table 1: Basic Information of Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Gender	Age	Identity Type	Working Years
DF-01	Male	42	Person in charge of Provincial Football Association	10
DF-02	Male	38	Coordinator of Youth Campus Football Matches	8
DF-03	Male	34	Head Teacher of a Football Characteristic School	6
DF-04	Male	36	Head Coach of Youth Football School Team	7
DF-05	Female	31	Promoter of Youth Campus Football	5
DF-06	Male	29	Youth Football Training Coach	4
DF-07	Male	35	Football Teacher and Referee	8
DF-08	Male	40	Leader of Campus Football Parent Volunteers	2
DF-09	Female	33	Person in charge of Event Company	6
DF-10	Male	44	Overall Coordinator of Campus Football Work	9

3. Origin of the “Zero Spectators” Phenomenon in Campus Football Matches

Although China’s campus football competition system covers various forms such as leagues, summer camps, selection matches and friendly matches for all age groups, the competition levels involve national, provincial, municipal and school-level matches, and the competition system includes both short-term centralized matches and decentralized competitions among schools. However, all the above matches are generally faced with the problem of “zero spectators”.

In contrast, Japan’s campus football matches have developed for nearly a century, and football education is deeply integrated into the campus cultural system. Taking the final of the 103rd Japan High School Football Championship as an example, the match attracted 58,347 spectators to attend, with a warm atmosphere, and its influence is not inferior to that of professional leagues [2]. In contrast, the prevalent “zero spectators” phenomenon in China’s campus football matches has become a key shortcoming restricting the development quality of matches, which urgently needs to be highly valued.

Interviewee DF-01: “There are many types of campus football matches in China, but they are generally trapped in the dilemma of no spectators, which seriously restricts the development of matches.”

The “zero spectators” phenomenon in campus football matches is not an isolated problem, but a product of the superposition of multiple contradictions such as external environment, competition operation, subject concepts and cultural foundation in the popularization and development of campus football in China. This phenomenon runs through the whole process of preparation, holding and promotion of campus football matches, and various restrictive factors are intertwined, eventually leading to the absence of spectators and turning the match into a “one-man show” for participants only.

Interviewee DF-02: “The ‘zero spectators’ phenomenon in campus football is by no means a problem of a single school or a single match, but the result of the combined effect of multiple contradictions.”

4. Causes of the “Zero Spectators” Phenomenon in Campus Football Matches

The “zero spectators” dilemma in campus football matches is not induced by a single factor, but the result of the joint action of many problems. Various shortcomings restrict each other,

making the matches lack appeal, poor spectator access and low willingness to watch, eventually forming the “zero spectators” phenomenon. The specific causes can be divided into the following five aspects.

4.1 Competition Organization: Lack of Refinement and Standardization Dilemma

Insufficient refinement and professional level in the organization and management of campus football matches are important factors leading to the loss of spectators [3]. Most primary and secondary school football matches lack systematic planning in preparation and operation, and lack supporting links such as opening ceremonies, award ceremonies and halftime interactions, resulting in insufficient ritual construction and viewing experience of the matches, making it difficult to effectively mobilize and stimulate participation of the spectator group.

Interviewee DF-10: “The organization and management of matches are too extensive, the professionalism is not up to standard, the preparation and operation of matches are not systematic, the sense of ritual and appreciation are poor, and spectators cannot be retained.”

There is an obvious deviation in the positioning of matches. Some campus football matches overemphasize competitiveness, one-sidedly pursue competition results, and ignore the fun and popularization characteristics that youth football activities should have. At the level of competition organization, the referee work and order maintenance lack standardization, which not only affects the viewing experience of the match, but also fails to create the order atmosphere that a formal match should have, thereby weakening the willingness of teachers, students and parents to watch. In addition, the hardware configuration of most venues is relatively simple, and supporting facilities such as venue maintenance and logistical support are absent, further reducing audience participation.

Interviewee DF-04: “Many matches are mispositioned, blindly pursuing competitive results, and the rhythm is not suitable for teenagers.”

Interviewee DF-07: “The referee’s law enforcement and venue order maintenance are not standardized, affecting the viewing experience. The venue hardware layout is simple, and the basic viewing conditions are insufficient, so spectators are naturally unwilling to come.”

4.2 Promotion: Lagging Communication Strategies and Weak Content Construction

The lag of promotion work is one of the key factors leading to low audience participation in campus football matches. At present, the promotion methods of most campus football matches are formal and single, mainly relying on traditional means such as oral notifications in schools and posting schedules on bulletin boards for information transmission, with narrow promotion coverage and limited communication efficiency [4]. Schools fail to effectively use multiple communication channels such as campus radio, official WeChat official accounts, class parent groups and short video platforms for pre-match warm-up and match promotion, resulting in poor access to key information such as match time, competing teams and venue for teachers, students and parents. Even if they have the willingness to watch, it is difficult to achieve effective participation.

Interviewee DF-06: “New media and home-school channels are not well used, pre-match warm-up is insufficient, everyone does not know the match information, and there is no way to participate even if they want to.”

At the same time, the promotion content is relatively thin, mostly staying at the level of basic release of match information, lacking in-depth presentation of match highlights, participating team styles and the educational value of football, making it difficult to stimulate the attention and psychological expectation of the spectator group. In addition, the lack of continuous communication content such as match reviews and wonderful highlights after the match makes it difficult for the match to form a sustained attention effect.

Interviewee DF-02: “The promotion content is too thin, only sending schedule information, and there is no review and highlights after the match, so the match is gradually forgotten by teachers, students and parents.”

4.3 Match Time: Conflicting Arrangements Restrict Viewing Willingness

The conflict between match time arrangement and school teaching schedule and family daily schedule is an important objective factor restricting spectator participation. At present, campus football matches are mostly concentrated during class breaks, lunch breaks and after-school service hours on weekdays, and some matches also overlap with regular cultural courses or exam review time. Restricted by classroom discipline and academic tasks, students are difficult to watch matches during non-free time; due to teaching preparation, class management and other responsibilities, teachers also lack spare time to stop and watch matches. For parents, working days highly overlap with working hours, making it difficult to spare time to go to campus to watch matches. In addition, some matches have temporary schedule adjustments without reserving sufficient time window to inform potential spectator groups. As a result, there are only participants around the venue, lacking effective participation of external spectators.

Interviewee DF-03: “Matches are mostly arranged on weekdays, conflicting with teaching and family time.”

Interviewee DF-08: “Parents have to work on weekdays, and matches are not held on weekends, so they can't come to

school to watch at all.”

4.4 Cultural Atmosphere: Lagging Cultivation and Lack of Viewing Tradition

The relative lag in the cultivation of campus football culture and insufficient accumulation of viewing atmosphere constitute the deep-seated cause of the “zero spectators” phenomenon. At this stage, the development of campus football mostly focuses on quantifiable evaluation indicators such as team formation, training and competition, and characteristic school rating, while paying insufficient attention to the infiltration and creation of football culture. There is a lack of diverse carriers such as football cultural exhibitions, themed activities and star story lectures on campus, students' cognition of football is limited, participation interest is difficult to stimulate, and a conscious viewing atmosphere has not yet been formed.

Interviewee DF-05: “Campus football emphasizes results over culture, insufficient atmosphere cultivation, and it is difficult to form a viewing atmosphere.”

Interviewee DF-10: “Schools lack carriers for football cultural activities, students' cognition is limited, and their willingness to watch is not high.”

Schools are relatively weak in cultivating sports event viewing literacy, and a stable campus football viewing tradition has not been established. In the absence of the demonstration role of campus stars and the driving of football atmosphere, students generally show low attention to campus football matches. At the same time, the overall campus sports culture atmosphere is insufficient, the tendency of “valuing intellectual education over physical education” still exists, football has not really integrated into campus daily life, and matches thus fall into the practical dilemma of “zero spectators”.

Interviewee DF-08: “The cultivation of viewing literacy is weak, there is no stable tradition, and students' attention is low.”

Interviewee DF-09: “Valuing intellectual education over physical education, football is not integrated into daily life, and matches lack mass base.”

4.5 School-Parent Cognition: Structural Bias and Participation Barriers

The structural bias in the functional cognition of campus football matches between families and schools constitutes the core inhibitory factor of the viewing behavior generation mechanism. Dominated by the school-running logic oriented to exam-oriented education, schools generally regard cultural course scores as the key indicator of educational effectiveness, believing that organizing spectatorship occupies students' learning time and disturbs campus teaching order, thus lacking institutional support to encourage and guide students and teachers to participate in spectatorship, and even restricting gathering for viewing. Parents, deeply influenced by utilitarian educational concepts, regard academic performance as the primary evaluation standard of

educational effectiveness, believing that spectatorship lacks educational value and occupies academic time, so they not only do not support their children to watch, but also lack the willingness to take the initiative to enter the campus to watch. Influenced by the above environment, students also focus their main energy on cultural course learning, lack interest foundation in football and matches, and are difficult to take the initiative to allocate time to participate in spectatorship.

Interviewee DF-01: “The dual cognitive biases of families and schools directly compress the composition space of spectator groups, resulting in a structural lack of audience support for campus football matches.”

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusions

The “zero spectators” phenomenon in campus football matches is not caused by a single factor, but the result of the superposition of multiple factors. The lack of professionalism and lagging communication mechanism at the level of competition operation directly weaken the appeal and accessibility of matches; insufficient cultural cultivation and structural bias in school-parent cognition deeply inhibit the formation of viewing willingness. The above factors jointly lead to the lack of spectators at the matches, reflecting the deep-seated dilemma in the current development of campus football in China.

5.2 Suggestions

5.2.1 Change Subject Cognition and Gather Viewing Synergy

School administrators should abandon the utilitarian school-running orientation, regard football as an important carrier for cultivating students’ comprehensive quality, adjust match time to avoid conflicts with teaching schedules, and provide institutional support for teachers and students to watch matches. Parents should correctly understand the educational value of football, support their children to watch matches, and form a positive interaction of home-school collaboration.

5.2.2 Optimize Competition Operation and Improve Viewing Experience

Competition organization should strengthen systematic planning and enhance the sense of ritual and appreciation; reasonably arrange match time, prioritize after-school hours, weekends and holidays to facilitate the participation of teachers, students and parents. In terms of promotion, new media platforms should be fully utilized to carry out pre-match warm-up, in-match reports and post-match reviews to continuously create match enthusiasm.

5.2.3 Strengthen Cultural Cultivation and Improve Venue Facilities

Schools should strengthen the construction of football culture, enhance students’ sense of identity with football through carriers such as themed activities and telling star stories, and gradually form a stable viewing tradition. At the same time,

improve the construction and maintenance of venue facilities to create a good environment for audience participation.

5.2.4 Improve Evaluation Mechanism and Promote Continuous Improvement

Establish an evaluation system covering indicators such as attendance rate and match influence, introduce an audience satisfaction feedback mechanism, and drive the continuous optimization of match services with data to continuously improve the appeal and mass base of campus football matches.

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Author Profile

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