

The Social Value and Cohesion Formation Mechanism of Outdoor Sports Communities: Investigation Based on Online Ethnography

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of intensified social atomization and the promotion of national fitness, outdoor sports communities have become a new type of leisure and social carrier in contemporary times, with weak relationships as the link. This article adopts the research method of online ethnography, relying on weak relationship theory and interactive ritual chain theory, selects folk outdoor sports communities as research samples, and combines online observation and offline participatory observation to explore their social value and cohesion formation mechanism. Research has shown that outdoor sports communities have multidimensional social value at the individual, community, and social levels. They can achieve functions such as emotional stress relief, interpersonal expansion, and resource sharing, and have a positive effect on optimizing social relationships and empowering sports, culture, and tourism; Community cohesion is generated by the coupling of interest consensus, two-way interaction, institutional norms, cultural identity, and external environment, presenting an evolutionary feature from shallow aggregation to deep belonging. This study clarifies the operational logic of weak relationship leisure communities, enriches the research results of outdoor sports sociology, and provides theoretical reference for the standardized and long-term development of outdoor sports communities and the optimization of modern folk social ecology.

Keywords: outdoor sports community; social value; cohesion; online ethnography; weak relationship

1. Introduction

Against the dual backdrop of the deepening of the national fitness strategy and the rapid development of digital socialization, residents' leisure consumption concepts continue to upgrade, and outdoor sports have gradually become an important way of life for contemporary people to relieve stress, relax, entertain, and socialize. Relying on online platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, outdoor sports communities centered on interest aggregation have rapidly emerged, forming a new type of informal community organization that combines online communication and offline travel. Different from traditional acquaintance socialization, outdoor sports communities are linked by weak social relationships and break down class, age, and occupational barriers with their characteristics of openness, spontaneity, and equality [1]. They have become an important social carrier in modern society to alleviate individual atomization and dissolve interpersonal alienation. In this context, exploring the intrinsic social value of outdoor sports communities and clarifying their cohesion generation logic has important historical value and research significance.

From existing research, current academic studies on outdoor sports mostly focus on industrial economics, sports health, event planning, and other fields, with a focus on macro industry analysis; The research on the community level is relatively weak, mostly staying at the surface level of phenomenon description, lacking in-depth analysis of the social logic and cohesion mechanism of the community, and few scholars adopt the method of online ethnography to conduct long-term immersive observation of the community. The research perspective and methods have certain limitations. To fill the existing research gap, this article is based on a sociological perspective and takes outdoor sports communities as the research object. It adopts research methods such as online ethnography, participatory observation, and in-depth interviews to track the online interaction and offline practical behavior of communities for a long time.

This article systematically analyzes the diverse social values of outdoor sports communities in terms of individual, community, and social dimensions, dissects the formation elements and internal

mechanisms of community cohesion layer by layer, summarizes the current practical difficulties in community development, and proposes targeted optimization paths. This study aims to enrich the theoretical achievements related to leisure communities and weak relationship socialization, clarify the operational logic of outdoor sports communities, provide practical references for the standardized operation and benign development of communities, and help the outdoor industry and the healthy and long-term development of national leisure culture.

2. Related concepts, theoretical foundations, and research designs

To clarify the operational logic of outdoor sports communities, define research boundaries and analytical frameworks, and solidify the theoretical foundation of the entire study, this chapter clearly defines the core concepts in the article, sorts out the basic theories that are suitable for this research, and completes the research design in conjunction with the research theme. This article takes online ethnography as the core research method, clarifies the research process and data sources, and provides a scientific and standardized research premise for analyzing social value and dismantling the mechanism of cohesion formation in the following text, ensuring the objectivity and rigor of the research.

2.1 Definition of core concepts

The outdoor sports community is an informal community organization formed on the basis of the Internet social platform, guided by the common interest of outdoor leisure sports such as hiking, mountaineering, camping, etc., and voluntarily participated by ordinary social members [2]. This type of community uses online communication as a means of communication and offline outdoor activities as a practical form. Unlike institutionalized and specialized sports organizations, it has the basic characteristics of weak relationships, spontaneity, openness, and equality. Community members are not strictly limited by age, occupation, or social class, and are united by their interests and identities. There are no mandatory admission rules or hierarchical management systems, and temporary and loose group connections are formed during activities. This is a typical form of leisure social communities in the digital age.

Social value is the comprehensive utility generated by individuals in the process of group interaction, covering multiple dimensions of individuals, communities, and society[3]. The social value of outdoor sports communities referred to in this article specifically refers to individual values such as emotional satisfaction, interpersonal expansion, and spiritual enhancement obtained by members in community communication, outdoor practice, and group interaction, as well as organizational values such as resource sharing and cultural symbiosis formed by the community itself. It also includes social values such as optimizing social relationships, promoting national fitness, and empowering the cultural tourism industry. Its essence is the comprehensive positive utility derived from the interaction practice of weak relationship social circles.

Community cohesion is an important indicator for measuring the stability of a group, referring to the centripetal force and sense of belonging formed by members within the community based on emotional identification, value consensus, and rule constraints. Based on the characteristics of outdoor sports communities, this article defines them as the collective sense of attachment, trust, and solidarity generated by members' interest consensus, emotional connection, and cultural identity in long-term online and offline interactions. The cohesion is reflected in the participation of members in activities, the retention rate of the community, and the willingness of the group to cooperate, which is the core internal driving force for maintaining the long-term development of outdoor sports communities.

2.2 Theoretical basis

2.2.1 Weak relationship theory

The theory of weak relationships was proposed by sociologist Granovite, which divides interpersonal connections into strong and weak relationships. Strong relationships rely on blood ties and geography to form, with solidified circles; And weak relationships are linked by interests and needs, with a wider range of interpersonal communication and stronger information flow. Most members of outdoor sports communities have non acquaintance relationships and belong to typical weak relationship social networks[4]. They can break through the limitations of inherent social circles, broaden individual social resources, and provide theoretical support for the generation of social value in the community.

2.2.2 Interactive ritual chain theory

The theory of interactive ritual chain emphasizes that individuals accumulate emotional energy through physical coexistence, mutual attention, and emotional sharing in a common scene, thereby forming group identity[5]. The offline travel and online communication of outdoor sports communities form interactive ritual scenes, where members complete emotional exchanges through collaboration, mutual assistance, and shared experiences, continuously accumulating group emotional energy and becoming the core theoretical basis for the generation of community cohesion.

2.2.3 Community belonging theory

Community belonging is the subjective emotion of an individual's psychological attachment and identity recognition towards a group. In outdoor sports communities, members gradually transition from strangers to group members by continuously participating in activities, integrating into group culture, and gaining recognition from others, ultimately forming a stable sense of belonging and further strengthening community cohesion.

2.3 Research design

This article uses online ethnography as the core research method, supplemented by literature research, participatory observation, and in-depth interviews. By immersing itself in online outdoor sports communities over an extended period, this research observes in-group behaviors including daily interactions, activity postings and information exchanges. Researchers take part in offline hiking and camping activities to document detailed group communication conditions. In addition, participants from diverse social circles are selected for semi-structured interviews to gather subjective perceptual data and guarantee the authenticity and comprehensiveness of research materials. The survey selected three types of folk outdoor sports communities: urban hiking, leisure camping, and lightweight mountaineering, with a research period of four months. During the research period, the researchers continuously collect online chat transcripts, activity announcements and members' interactive content, archive field observation notes from offline events, and summarize the behavioral traits and emotional shifts of community members. Meanwhile, they collate foundational data covering community management regulations, activity patterns and membership composition to furnish empirical evidence for subsequent mechanism analysis. The research data mainly comes from four types of channels: first, online community chat records and activity information; The second is the field notes obtained through offline participatory observation; The third is the text of in-depth interviews with community members; The fourth is the public statistical data of the outdoor industry. Multi-channel data sources can effectively avoid the limitations of a single research method, enhance research credibility and academic rigor.

3. Social value representation of outdoor sports communities

3.1 Individual level: Meeting diverse personal development needs

Emotional catharsis and psychological decompression value. The fast-paced lifestyle of modern society increases individual mental burden, and the normalization of workplace pressure, life anxiety, and social distancing breeds negative emotions. Outdoor sports communities rely on natural scenes to break through the closed living spaces of cities and provide individuals with a carrier for emotional release. During outdoor activities, members break free from daily work constraints and interpersonal pressure, and use the natural environment to relieve mental tension; At the same time, the equal and relaxed communication atmosphere within the group weakens social defenses, allowing members to freely express their subjective feelings and achieve emotional release. This non-utilitarian leisure interaction can effectively alleviate individual loneliness, improve negative psychological states, and achieve psychological health adjustment.

Interpersonal expansion and social capital accumulation value. According to the theory of weak relationships, outdoor sports communities use interests as a cohesive bond, breaking down social limitations based on blood, geography, and industry. Community members have different professional backgrounds, age groups, and life experiences, and individuals build diverse interpersonal networks through shared travel and daily communication. Compared to a fixed circle of acquaintances, weak relationship socialization can broaden information acquisition channels, enrich individual social capital, and achieve cross-circle resource exchange. Meanwhile, interest-oriented casual social interaction cuts down the cost of interpersonal communication, eases modern people's social anxiety, and enables

individuals to rebuild relaxed and steady social bonds.

Self-identification and spiritual empowerment value. Outdoor sports have challenging and exploratory characteristics. Members constantly break through their physiological limits, overcome difficulties brought by outdoor environments, and gain a sense of achievement and satisfaction through activities such as hiking and mountaineering. In a community atmosphere of mutual assistance, individuals' abilities and values are recognized by others, further strengthening their sense of self-identity. In addition, immersive experiences that are close to nature can reshape individual life cognition, weaken material anxiety, cultivate positive life concepts that love life and admire nature, and achieve spiritual self-improvement.

3.2 Community level: Building a stable development foundation for communities

Resource sharing to optimize the efficiency of community operations. The outdoor sports community has the attribute of resource interconnection. Members rely on online platforms to share outdoor equipment, travel strategies, risk avoidance knowledge, and route resources, forming an internal ecology of mutual assistance and sharing. Ordinary members can obtain professional outdoor knowledge at low cost through the community, reducing travel costs; The community relies on the integration of member resources, enriches activity forms, and optimizes travel plans. The behavior of resource sharing not only improves the experience quality of individual outdoor activities, but also reduces the operating costs of the community, optimizes the overall operating structure, and ensures the normalization of community activities.

Cultural symbiosis shapes the collective temperament of the community. In long-term interactive practice, a shared cultural concept of mutual assistance, inclusiveness, low-carbon self-discipline, and closeness to nature has gradually formed within the community. Communities abandon utilitarian communication logic and maintain group relationships through pure interest connections, forming a unique cultural temperament that distinguishes them from other social organizations. A unified value system can weaken member differences, strengthen group consensus, shape a positive community culture, and provide spiritual support for the long-term stable development of the community.

Interactive connection strengthens the cohesion within the community. Online daily chatting, experience sharing, and offline collaborative travel form a two-way interactive system, continuously narrowing the psychological distance between members. Members help each other in outdoor activities, jointly cope with emergencies, and form emotional resonance and interpersonal trust. Frequent and gentle interactive behaviors continuously strengthen group connections, enhance members' sense of community belonging, reduce personnel turnover, and stabilize the organizational structure of the community.

3.3 Social level: Supporting the healthy development of society

Promote nationwide fitness and optimize the public sports ecosystem. Outdoor sports communities have the attribute of mass communication. By organizing outdoor travel activities on a regular basis, the community promotes the concept of sports and health to the society and lowers the threshold for mass sports. Compared to official sports promotion forms, the dissemination methods of folk communities are more approachable and interesting, which can drive ordinary people to participate in sports, expand the coverage of national fitness, optimize the public sports service system, and help implement the national fitness strategy.

Resolve social alienation and improve modern social relations. The atomization characteristics of modern society are significant, and problems such as interpersonal alienation and unfamiliar neighbors are commonly present. Outdoor sports communities build equal and open public communication spaces, weaken class barriers and social barriers, and promote equal communication between unfamiliar individuals. A large-scale benign weak relationship network can alleviate social apathy, reshape social order among the people, and optimize the structure of social interpersonal relationships.

Empower the cultural and tourism industry and activate the vitality of the market economy. The outdoor sports community frequently carries out activities such as suburban hiking and mountain camping, directly driving the development of related industries such as outdoor equipment consumption, rural cultural tourism, and short distance travel. Community traffic can activate niche natural scenic spots and rural tourism resources, promote the integrated development of outdoor culture and tourism, inject momentum into local economic growth, and achieve a win-win situation between social and economic benefits.

4. Formation mechanism of cohesion in outdoor sports communities

4.1 Basic premise: Building community connections through interest consensus

Common interests are the logical starting point for building outdoor sports communities and the initial prerequisite for generating cohesion. In modern diversified leisure activities, individuals select their sports circles based on their own preferences, and outdoor hobbies such as hiking and camping form a natural screening mechanism, gathering social individuals with similar aesthetic preferences and leisure concepts. The pursuit of homogeneous interests lowers the social threshold of the group, weakens the social barriers caused by identity, occupation, and class, and enables members to reach a preliminary consensus on value preferences. From the perspective of community generation logic, interest consensus builds the foundation of group identity, prompting unfamiliar individuals to spontaneously gather and form a loose initial group form. This interest-based spontaneous connection avoids utilitarian communication motives and builds a sound and stable foundation for subsequent emotional bonding and the formation of group cohesion.

4.2 Generating motivation: Build directional interaction enhances emotional connection

Two way interaction is the core driving force behind community cohesion, which is in line with the internal logic of the interactive ritual chain theory. On the online level, communities rely on online platforms to form normalized interactive scenes. Members share outdoor experiences, exchange equipment knowledge, and discuss travel strategies to maintain daily lightweight communication and alleviate the sense of alienation among unfamiliar groups; At the offline level, the outdoor mountains and wilderness form a shared ceremonial space, where members help each other during hiking, camping, and rest, and jointly cope with unexpected situations such as complex road conditions and extreme weather. The interactive ritual of physical coexistence, mutual attention, and emotional sharing continuously accumulates emotional energy, promotes the transformation of shallow interest connections into deep emotional connections, strengthens the sense of trust and closeness among members, and completes the initial generation of community cohesion.

4.3 Consolidation and guarantee: Standardize institutional constraints on group behavior

Informal institutional norms are an important guarantee for maintaining community order and stabilizing cohesion. Based on the observation of online ethnography, it can be seen that although folk outdoor sports communities do not have strict official management systems, they have spontaneously formed customary codes of conduct in long-term operation, covering activity registration norms, cost sharing mechanisms, travel safety rules, mutual assistance etiquette, and other contents. At the same time, community managers formulate management rules such as group review and behavior norms to constrain members' inappropriate behavior, avoid interpersonal conflicts and security risks. Institutional norms clarify the boundaries of group behavior, maintain a fair and safe community environment, and enhance members' sense of security. The standardized operation mode reduces human conflicts, stabilizes the internal order of the community, and provides a hard guarantee for the continuous strengthening of cohesion.

4.4 Sublimation of core: Cultivating cultural identity and community sense of belonging

Cultural identity is the spiritual core that elevates community cohesion, driving group connections from behavioral attachment to psychological belonging. In long-term interactive practice, the community has gradually formed a common culture of advocating nature, resilience and inclusiveness, mutual assistance and equality, and low-carbon self-discipline. During the process of continuous participation in activities, members continuously accept and internalize community values and concepts, forming a unified group cultural cognition. Compared to surface level interactive connections, cultural identity has stronger stability and persistence, which can weaken the community fluctuations caused by personnel mobility. Members rely on cultural consensus to generate group identity, construct exclusive circle cultural symbols, form a strong sense of belonging and collective identity, and achieve deep sublimation of community cohesion.

4.5 External support: Environmental empowerment enhances cohesion and stickiness

The natural environment and the surrounding environment form external conditions that enhance

cohesion. On the one hand, natural scenes such as mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes are detached from the oppressive living space of cities. Beautiful natural landscapes relieve individual psychological pressure, weaken interpersonal defense psychology, and create a comfortable environment for positive interaction; On the other hand, the niche interest circle has privacy and purity, without complex interest disputes, further maintaining a simple and friendly communication atmosphere. The natural environment empowers sensory experience, the circle environment optimizes communication quality, and the dual external conditions jointly enhance members' activity experience. Good experiential memory strengthens members' willingness to participate, increases community retention rate, continuously enhances community cohesion and stickiness, and achieves long-term stable development of cohesion.

5. Conclusion

This article takes outdoor sports communities as the research object, relying on the research method of online ethnography, and combining sociological basic theories such as weak relationship theory and interactive ritual chain theory, to systematically analyze the social value and cohesion formation mechanism of outdoor sports communities. From the perspective of multidimensional value representation, outdoor sports communities have obvious hierarchical social value: at the individual level, communities can meet the diverse needs of people for emotional release, interpersonal expansion, and self realization; At the community level, relying on resource sharing, cultural symbiosis, and continuous interaction to maintain the stable operation of the organization; At the societal level, it plays a positive role in promoting national fitness, resolving atomized social relationships, and empowering the development of cultural and tourism industries. Compared to traditional acquaintance socialization, outdoor sports communities use interests as a link to build a low pressure, non utilitarian weak relationship social field, becoming a typical representative of modern leisure communities.

Research shows that the cohesion of outdoor sports communities presents a progressive formation logic. Interest consensus is the fundamental prerequisite for community aggregation, providing initial conditions for group formation; The bidirectional interaction between online and offline relies on interactive rituals to accumulate emotional energy, which is the core driving force for the generation of cohesion; Informal institutional norms constrain group behavior and provide guarantees for community stability; Cultural identity achieves emotional sublimation and cultivates a sense of belonging among members; The natural environment and the hierarchical environment serve as external reinforcements to further strengthen community cohesion, and the five elements are coupled with each other to form a complete cohesive evolution mechanism.

There are still certain limitations to this study. Due to research conditions, the sample coverage of this article is limited, and it has not been able to conduct differentiated comparative analysis of outdoor sports communities in different regions and scales. Future research can expand the survey sample and improve comparative studies. Meanwhile, with the continuous iteration of new media technology, the development form of outdoor sports communities will continue to evolve. In the future, we can further explore the development difficulties and optimization paths of communities under the digital background, providing theoretical references for the standardization and sustainable development of folk leisure communities.

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