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An Analysis of Operational Strategies for the Honour of Kings KPL from the Perspective of the Fan Economy

Tongrui Pang[a]

Qilu University of Technology (Shandong Academy of Sciences), Jinan, Shandong 250353, China
[a]Email: 2717621792@qq.com

ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of the mobile esports industry, the fan economy has become a core driver of esports IP value growth. As a flagship mobile esports tournament in China, the Honour of Kings KPL, despite possessing a vast fan base, faces operational challenges including insufficient fan stickiness, shallow commercial monetisation, and community engagement fatigue. Based on 100 valid questionnaires collected from actual respondents, this study adopts the fan economy as its core theoretical perspective. Employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, and regression analyses, it systematically examines the KPL's current operations across the dimensions of content production, community management, and commercial monetisation, while validating the theoretical model of "emotional connection → behavioural transformation → value co-creation". The findings reveal that KPL fans are predominantly female and students, with strong emotional identification but relatively low commercial satisfaction, reflecting a "high emotion, low conversion" dilemma. Emotional identification showed significant positive correlations with both consumption and dissemination behaviours. Fan seniority and viewing frequency positively influenced emotional identification and consumption. Female fans outperformed male fans on emotional connection, consumption, and co-creation intention. Based on these results, the study proposes actionable optimisation strategies, offering practical guidance for the KPL and similar mobile esports tournaments.

KEYWORDS

Fan Economy; KPL; Esports Operations; Emotional Connection; Behavioural Transformation; Value Co-creation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

China's esports industry has entered a phase of rapid growth. According to the 2024 China Esports Industry Report[1],the number of esports users in China has exceeded 500 million, with Generation Z (aged 18–27) accounting for more than 70%. Within this vast market, the Honour of Kings Professional League (KPL) has become one of the most influential mobile esports tournaments in the country, owing to the convenience and social nature of mobile gaming. The KPL not only attracts massive viewership and commercial sponsorship but has also built a diverse commercial ecosystem around the league, encompassing live streaming, merchandise, membership programmes, and fan communities.

However, hidden concerns lie beneath this prosperity. On the one hand, fans' consumption behaviour is increasingly shifting from being “function-oriented” to “emotion-oriented” - they purchase

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merchandise, participate in fan support activities, and create user-generated content not merely to acquire products, but to express their emotional identification with and sense of belonging to teams and players[2]. On the other hand, many fans have reported that official content focuses too heavily on the matches themselves, lacking emotional narratives; community activities are monotonous and fail to meet the interactive needs of fans at different levels; and merchandise designs are perceived as crude, with some fans criticising them as "exploitative commercialisation". These signs indicate that the KPL's operational logic has not yet fully adapted to the dynamics of the fan economy.

Research by Shanghai University of Sport [3] found that satisfaction with virtual communities is a necessary condition for team loyalty, while virtual community activity and brand value co-creation behaviours are high-frequency elements in the pathway combination. These studies provide important theoretical references for this research; however, existing studies largely focus on describing fan characteristics and lack systematic quantitative assessment of operational strategies.

1.2 Research Objectives

Against this background, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

(1) To systematically describe the demographic characteristics of KPL fans, their levels of emotional identification, and their satisfaction with operational strategies, based on actual survey data.

(2) To validate the "emotional connection → behavioural transformation → value co-creation" theoretical model and reveal the mechanisms by which emotional identification drives fans' consumption and dissemination behaviours.

(3) To identify the core shortcomings in KPL operations and propose fan-economy-based optimisation strategies tailored to the KPL.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance: On the one hand, this study fills a gap in research on the relationship between "fan economy and operational strategies" within esports; existing fan economy research has largely focused on traditional sports and entertainment industries, with few theoretical findings specific to mobile esports. On the other hand, the construction of the "emotional connection → behavioural transformation → value co-creation" theoretical model provides a new analytical framework for fan operations in esports tournaments, enriching the theoretical system of the fan economy in the digital age.

Practical Significance: This study provides actionable operational optimisation solutions for the KPL league, participating teams, and esports organisations, helping them address current challenges in fan management, enhance fan stickiness, and boost the commercial value of the tournament IP. At the same time, it offers a reference for fan economy operations in other mobile esports tournaments (such as the PEL and WRL), promoting the healthy and sustainable development of the esports industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of the Fan Economy

The concept of the fan economy stems from observations of fan consumption behaviour. Early research primarily focused on the entertainment and sports industries, revealing that fans not only purchase products but also engage deeply in value creation through activities such as fan support, community participation, and content creation. Henry Jenkins' theories of "participatory culture" and "convergence culture" form the cornerstone of fan studies, emphasising that fans are no longer passive audiences but active content producers and meaning-makers[4].

Regarding the driving mechanisms of the fan economy, scholars generally recognise the core pathway of "emotional identification → consumption behaviour". Xue Haibo[5] demonstrated that community interaction rituals can be transformed into emotional energy, which in turn influences fan loyalty. Jin Liyin[6] pointed out that the value dimensions of virtual brand communities significantly affect members' sense of community, loyalty, and behavioural tendencies.

2.2 Current Research on Esports Tournament Operations

Domestic research on esports operations began relatively late but has developed rapidly. Zhang Wenjie[2] noted that esports fans form genuine social relationships and emotional connections with their idols through data labour and symbolic practices. Shanghai University of Sport[3] found that satisfaction with virtual communities is a necessary condition for team loyalty. Regarding esports fan communities, Zhu Danhong and Lin Xudong[7] analysed the mechanisms of emotional expression among esports spectators based on "interaction ritual chains". Liu Jiwen[8] noted that fans reinforce their group identity through interactions on both online and offline channels.Chen Hui and Yang Ning[9] explored the mechanisms of value co-creation in online brand communities from a social network perspective, finding that customer engagement acts as a mediating factor. Liu Xin and Yang Weiwen[10] further confirmed that virtual brand community identity significantly influences brand loyalty.

2.3 International Research

International research on the fan economy is grounded in the core theoretical foundations of "participatory culture" and "fan community identity". Social identity theory [11] provides an important framework for understanding fans' sense of group belonging. Cunningham and Fairley[12] conducted a systematic review of sports fan experiences. However, existing international research has paid little attention to China's domestic mobile esports tournaments (such as the KPL) and has not fully integrated the consumption habits and cultural characteristics of Chinese Generation Z fans.

2.4 Research Gaps and the Positioning of This Study

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals research gaps including fragmented perspectives, reliance on single methodologies, insufficient localisation, and overly generalised strategic recommendations. This study addresses these shortcomings by adopting the "fan economy" as its core integrative perspective. It employs an empirical approach through questionnaire surveys to construct an "emotion → behaviour → value" model and proposes actionable operational strategies.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Theoretical Framework and Model

Grounded in participatory culture theory[4], social identity theory[11], and consumer behaviour theory, this study constructs a theoretical model of "emotional connection → behavioural transformation → value co-creation": organisers establish emotional connections with fans through content and community management; emotional identification drives fans' consumption and dissemination behaviours; and this, in turn, facilitates the co-creation of value between the tournament IP and its fans.

3.2 Research Participants and Data Sources

The study focused on fans of the Honour of Kings KPL. A questionnaire was distributed via the Wenjuanxing platform, yielding 100 valid responses. Inclusion criteria: having watched a KPL match or following at least one KPL team or player on social media.

3.3 Questionnaire Design and Variable Measurement

The questionnaire comprised screening questions (2 items), basic demographic information (7 items), emotional connection (8 items), perceptions of operational strategies (content: 5 items; community: 5 items; commercial: 6 items), behavioural transformation (dissemination: 3 items; consumption: 2 items + consumption amount: 1 item), value co-creation intention (4 items), and open-ended questions. The scale utilised a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree/dissatisfied/never; 5 = strongly agree/satisfied/always).

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

SPSS was employed for descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression.

3.5 Reliability Analysis

The reliability coefficients for each scale are presented in Table 1 below; all are greater than 0.8, indicating good internal consistency.

Table 1. Results of Reliability Analysis

Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Emotional Connection	8	0.916
Content Satisfaction	5	0.866
Community Satisfaction	5	0.898
Commercial Satisfaction	6	0.933
Dissemination Behaviour	3	0.877
Consumption Behaviour	4	0.870
Value Co-creation Intention	4	0.912

4. RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Of the 100 valid responses, 67% were female, 52% were students, 34% had been fans for four years or more, and the largest group (31%) watched matches “occasionally”. The mean values for the core variables are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Core Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional Connection	4.30	0.92
Content Satisfaction	3.86	0.99
Community Satisfaction	3.76	1.03
Commercial Satisfaction	3.27	1.08
Dissemination Behaviour	3.87	1.02
Consumption Behaviour	3.38	1.20
Value Co-creation Intention	4.02	0.97

Spending distribution: 31% spent 0 yuan, 23% spent 1–100 yuan, 16% spent 101–500 yuan, 13% spent 501–1,000 yuan, and 17% spent over 1,000 yuan. Approximately 69% of fans made purchases, but high-value spending (above 1,000 yuan) accounted for only 17%.

4.2 Tests for Differences

Gender differences: Female fans scored significantly higher than male fans on emotional connection ($t = 2.45$, $p = 0.016$), consumption behaviour ($t = 2.98$, $p = 0.004$), and co-creation intention ($t = 3.21$, $p = 0.002$).

Differences by fan seniority: Core fans with four or more years of seniority scored significantly higher than new fans with less than one year on emotional connection ($F = 5.67$, $p < 0.001$), consumption behaviour ($F = 4.98$, $p = 0.001$), and value co-creation intention ($F = 5.12$, $p < 0.001$).

Differences by viewing frequency: Frequent viewers (≥3 matches per week) scored significantly higher than infrequent viewers on emotional connection ($F = 6.23$, $p < 0.001$) and consumption behaviour ($F = 5.45$, $p = 0.001$).

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation results are shown in Table 3. Emotional connection was moderately positively correlated with both consumption behaviour ($r = 0.551$) and dissemination behaviour ($r = 0.557$). Dissemination behaviour was highly correlated with consumption behaviour ($r = 0.680$), suggesting that social sharing may promote consumption.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variable Pair	*r*-value	*p*-value
Emotional Connection ↔ Consumption Behaviour	0.551	<0.001
Emotional Connection ↔ Dissemination Behaviour	0.557	<0.001
Content Satisfaction ↔ Emotional Connection	0.548	<0.001
Commercial Satisfaction ↔ Consumption Behaviour	0.447	<0.001
Dissemination Behaviour ↔ Consumption Behaviour	0.680	<0.001

4.4 Regression Analysis

With consumption behaviour as the dependent variable: Multiple linear regression revealed that emotional connection ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor, while commercial satisfaction ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.021$) and fan seniority ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.050$) also had significant positive effects. The model's $R^2 = 0.486$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.452$ ($F = 14.67$, $p < 0.001$).

With dissemination behaviour as the dependent variable: Emotional connection ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$) and content satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.038$) significantly predicted dissemination behaviour; the model's $R^2 = 0.412$ ($F = 16.65$, $p < 0.001$).

4.5 Text Analysis of Open-ended Questions

Coding Procedure. All 78 valid responses were imported into NVivo and coded inductively following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke[13]. The coding process proceeded as follows: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading; line-by-line coding to generate initial codes; grouping of codes into candidate themes based on conceptual similarities; review and refinement of themes against the original data; definition and naming of themes; and selection of representative quotations. An audit trail was maintained throughout, documenting coding decisions and theme development.

Classification Framework. The inductive analysis yielded four thematic categories:

Table 4. Thematic Classification Framework of Open-ended Question Responses

Theme	Definition	Example Keywords
Content-related suggestions	Broadcasting, documentaries, behind-the-scenes footage, content diversity	"documentary" "behind-the-scenes" "commentary"
Community-related suggestions	Engagement, feedback, participation, community management	"participation" "feedback" "interaction"
Commercial-related suggestions	Merchandise, pricing, ticketing, commercialisation intensity	"merchandise" "pricing" "ticket"
Operational improvement suggestions	Professionalism, mobile experience, platform features	"professionalism" "mobile" "experience"

Results. Four high-frequency categories emerged from fan suggestions: content demands (more behind-the-scenes footage, player documentaries, and content for female fans); community interaction (strengthening feedback mechanisms and lowering participation barriers); commercial optimisation (simplifying ticketing, improving merchandise design, and exercising restraint in commercialisation); and operational improvement (enhancing professionalism, optimising the mobile experience).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

5.1.1 The Centrality of Emotional Connection

Emotional connection emerged as the strongest predictor of both consumption ($\beta = 0.37$) and dissemination ($\beta = 0.45$) behaviours, reinforcing the core premise of fan economy theory. This aligns with Xue Haibo[5], who found that community interaction rituals generate emotional energy that translates into fan loyalty. The strong correlation between emotional connection and co-creation intention ($r = 0.595$) further confirms that emotionally engaged fans actively participate in value creation, consistent with Jenkins'[4]concept of "participatory culture".

5.1.2 The Commercial Satisfaction Gap

Commercial satisfaction recorded the lowest mean score (3.27/5), significantly below content (3.86) and community (3.76) satisfaction. This gap is consistent with fan comments criticising merchandise as "exploitative". Importantly, commercial satisfaction independently predicted consumption ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.021$), even when controlling for emotional connection. This dual-pathway finding-consumption driven by both emotional attachment and rational commercial evaluation-offers a nuanced contribution to fan economy theory.

5.1.3 The Role of Demographic Factors

Female fans outperformed males across emotional connection, consumption, and co-creation intention, confirming their high value as a segment. Long-standing fans (4+ years) consistently scored higher than newer fans across all dimensions, highlighting the strategic importance of retention and lifecycle management. Frequent viewers also demonstrated significantly higher engagement than infrequent viewers, suggesting that interventions to increase viewing frequency could indirectly boost emotional attachment and spending.

5.2 Model Explanatory Power and Limitations

The model explained 48.6% of variance in consumption behaviour and 41.2% in dissemination behaviour, indicating moderate-to-strong explanatory capacity. The unexplained variance (51–59%) may be attributable to unmeasured factors including personal income, price sensitivity, peer influence, content characteristics, match outcomes, and transient situational factors (e.g., championship events, roster changes). Future research incorporating these variables could enhance predictive power.

5.3 Sample Bias and Implications

The sample was predominantly female (67%) and student (52%). While this may limit generalisability to a gender-balanced or working-professional population, it offers valuable insights into two highly engaged segments. Female fans demonstrated significantly higher emotional engagement and consumption, suggesting that female-targeted strategies could be particularly effective. The high student proportion may have contributed to the low commercial satisfaction scores, as students have limited disposable income. Findings should be applied primarily to these segments, with validation needed across more diverse populations.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study integrates content, community, and commerce into a unified analytical framework, demonstrating their interdependence through a shared emotional mechanism. **Second**, it validates the "emotional connection → behavioural transformation → value co-creation" pathway in the mobile esports context, extending theories previously applied only to traditional sports and

entertainment. **Third**, it identifies dual drivers of consumption-emotional connection and commercial satisfaction-revealing that fan monetisation depends on both affective attachment and rational value evaluation.

5.5 Practical Implications

Content: Content satisfaction showed the strongest correlation with emotional connection (r = 0.548). Investment in player documentaries, behind-the-scenes footage, and fan-co-created content-particularly content tailored to female fans-should be prioritised.

Community: The three-tier interaction system (casual, active, and core fans) is supported by observed segment differences in engagement levels and needs.

Commercial: The commercial satisfaction gap (mean = 3.27) and fan criticism of merchandise quality suggest that improving perceived product value should be the immediate priority. Tiered pricing and experiential offerings can enhance satisfaction without alienating price-sensitive students.

Operations: Gender, seniority, and viewing-frequency differences underscore the need for segmented, data-driven operations informed by regular satisfaction surveys and behavioural analytics.

5.6 Summary

The KPL's fan economy operates through a dual mechanism—emotional connection and commercial satisfaction—that jointly shapes consumption and dissemination behaviours. The model demonstrates moderate-to-strong explanatory power, though sample biases indicate areas for refinement. Theoretical contributions include integration of operational dimensions, validation of the "emotional → behavioural → value" pathway, and identification of dual consumption drivers. Practically, content quality, segmented community management, and commercial value enhancement are priority areas for improvement.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Research Conclusion

(1) KPL fans are predominantly female and students. They demonstrate high emotional identification but low commercial satisfaction, creating a "high emotion, low conversion" dilemma.

(2) Emotional connection is the core driver of consumption and dissemination behaviours; commercial satisfaction and fan seniority also significantly influence consumption.

(3) Female fans, long-standing fans, and frequent viewers represent higher value and should be prioritised in operational strategies.

6.2 Optimisation Recommendations

Content: Strengthen emotional storytelling by increasing player documentaries and behind-the-scenes footage; establish a "fan-co-created content incentive scheme"; develop exclusive content for female fans.

Community: Construct a "three-tier interaction system" (casual fans, active fans, core fans) and establish a fan feedback mechanism.

Commercial: Enhance perceived value of products; implement tiered pricing; develop experiential products; and streamline the ticketing process.

Operations: Establish a data-driven performance evaluation system; conduct regular satisfaction surveys and optimise KPIs.

6.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations: The sample size was relatively small with a higher proportion of female respondents; cross-sectional data cannot establish causality; text mining and interviews were not incorporated.The thematic analysis was conducted by a single coder. Although systematic procedures and NVivo-assisted audit trails were employed to enhance rigour, the absence of inter-coder reliability testing may limit replicability.

Future directions: Expand the sample size and conduct multi-group validation; adopt longitudinal tracking studies; introduce structural equation modelling to test mediating effects; extend the analysis to comparative studies of other tournaments (PEL, WRL); integrate Python-based text mining and NVivo interview analysis to achieve mixed-method triangulation. Future research with multiple coders would strengthen reliability.

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