

An Attributional Analysis of the “Sports Buddy” Phenomenon among Generation Z Youth and Pathways for Its Guidance

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Abstract: "Sports partners," as a typical form of "partnership socializing" in sports contexts, have rapidly gained popularity among Generation Z youth in recent years, becoming an important lens for observing changes in contemporary youth social behavior. This study integrates online ethnography and semi-structured in-depth interviews, using mainstream social platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin as field sites, and conducts interviews with 20 Generation Z youth aged 18 – 30, systematically examining the types, causal mechanisms, and potential risks of the 'sports partner' phenomenon. The study finds that Generation Z youths' 'sports partner' practices display three typical forms: time-space equivalent type, light-relationship type, and mutually beneficial type. In terms of causation, the fragmentation of time and health anxiety brought by accelerated society constitute the underlying reality logic; algorithmic matching and location-based services provide structural empowerment; belonging to sports-interest circles fulfills young people's identity needs; and the emotional scarcity in the context of urban atomized living serves as a deeper individual motivator. At the same time, 'sports partner' socializing also carries issues such as oscillation between 'social addiction' and 'social fatigue,' solidification of sports circle barriers, and information verification risks triggered by matching with strangers. In response, this paper proposes a systematic set of guiding pathways along three dimensions—returning to the real-world relationships of the “nearby,” proactively breaking through circle barriers to achieve cross-circle integration, and strengthening the ecological governance of digital social spaces—with the aim of providing a reference for Generation Z to establish a healthy and sustainable mode of athletic socializing.

Keywords: Generation Z; Sports Buddy; Athletic Socializing; Precise Companionship

1. Introduction

The deep penetration of internet technology has rewritten the ways in which contemporary youth socialize, and Generation Z is gradually moving to the center of online social space. “Buddy-style” (dazi) socializing is one of the new forms that has emerged in this process, quickly gaining popularity among the younger generation. A survey by China Youth Daily shows that nearly 70% of young people regard finding a companion as a beneficial way to step out of their social comfort zone and try new forms of interaction [1]. 'dazi' originally denoted 'people who gather to play cards' in the Jiangnan dialect [2], but its meaning has been altered since it was applied on the Internet. Now it is usually used to refer to people assembling temporarily due to a shared interest or joint activity.

"Sports buddies" are one of the most typical kinds, and they also give a clear view on the social customs of present day youths. They originate from sports occasions, having relationships which are farther than those with close friends but nearer than those with strangers, usually kept for a certain sport. In our daily life, words such as 'gym buddy', 'running buddy', 'cycling buddy' and 'badminton buddy' are successively appearing, with the features being distinctly classified according to the sport. The nation's physical fitness level is increasingly regarded as an important indicator of social development and human progress, as well as a reflection of national comprehensive strength and social civilization. National development plans released in recent years have also explicitly proposed coordinating the development of mass sports and competitive sports while accelerating the construction of a strong sports nation. These state-level discussions provide a more macro-level

annotation for understanding the rise of the 'sports buddy' phenomenon—it is not an isolated youth subculture but, under the combined influence of policy promotion and individual choice, has gradually evolved into a lifestyle way for Generation Z to respond to the call for a strong sports nation, meeting the need for daily exercise while filling the gap in social companionship, reflecting the real needs of young people in the new era in both health and social interaction.

2. Literature Review

"Partner-based socializing" has emerged in recent years as a rapidly spreading form of youth social interaction, gradually entering the research field of journalism and communication studies since around 2023. Scholar such as Jin [3], Sun [4] and Duan [5] have discussed this issue, emphasizing the popularity among young people, the formation mechanisms and the possible risks, and trying to offer some effective measures. A summary of the present research shows that there is still a need for additional investigations in two aspects. Firstly, the research objects are relatively broad and lack specific classification. Most of the literature discusses "youth" as an undifferentiated whole, rarely making further distinctions based on specific developmental environments and states of mind. Generation Z are the digital natives of the digital age and the primary force driving the rise of new "fragmented" modes of socializing; yet studies that analyze Generation Z in conjunction with "buddy socializing" remain relatively few. Those currently available mainly include Meng's [6] analysis of the generative mechanisms and guidance strategies of Generation Z buddy socializing, Shen et al.'s [7] discussion of the "circle-breaking" logic of Generation Z "buddy-style" socializing based on Habermas's theory of communicative action, and He's [8] research on the emotional needs of Generation Z buddy culture. Second, most research remains at the level of holistic description of "buddy socializing," with insufficient in-depth cultivation of any specific subcategory, making it difficult to capture the distinctiveness and operating logic of different types of buddies. A survey by *China Youth Daily* indicates that sports buddies account for 43.4 percent of all types of buddies—nearly half—making them a vertical domain that warrants separate examination. Yet scholarly research focused on

the "sports buddy" remains relatively scarce. At present it mainly includes surface-level studies of contemporary youth sports participation by Huang and Li [9], the examination of the behavioral characteristics and operating logic of youth "sports buddies" on Xiaohongshu by Yang and Li [10], and the discussion of the formation mechanism and guidance pathways of sports-buddy socializing from the perspective of social capital by Ding [11].

In view of the gaps above, this paper focuses on the intersection of "Generation Z" and the "sports buddy," proceeding along the logic of "phenomenon—causes—pathways": it first delineates the basic features and typical forms of Generation Z youth's "sports buddy" practices, then dissects the interwoven effects of multiple underlying factors, and finally, in light of real-world needs and already manifest risks, explores pathways for the healthy development of this social mode.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Online Ethnography

Topics such as "the buddy as a new form of socializing" and "why Generation Z is so keen on finding buddies" have repeatedly trended online, with the cumulative volume of related discussion on mainstream social platforms exceeding one hundred million. Therefore, this research chooses three digital platforms, Weibo, Douyin and Xiaohongshu, which have both content production and social features, as the study areas. By using keywords like 'Generation Z youth' and 'sports partners', the research finds the topics and posts, and follows the long-term changes of some typical accounts and topics. By collecting samples and analyzing texts, it shows the real situation of the 'sports partner' phenomenon in online social environments.

Moreover, on Weibo, we picked up the popular topics like '#SportsBuddy#', '#WorkoutBuddy#', '#HaveYouFoundYourSummerBadmintonBuddy#', '#Post-2000sAreAlreadyFindingFitnessBuddy#', and '#YoungCyclingBuddiesInBeijing#', concentrating on the exchanges in both posts and comments; on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, we observed some accounts which regularly publish information about 'sports buddies', considering their updates, communication ways and the opinions from the fans, thus getting an idea of the present condition and trends of Generation Z

'seeking buddies' on the internet.

3.2 In-Depth Interviews

From December 2024, the researchers have selected interview subjects from campus networks, Xiaohongshu and WeChat groups, and finally chosen 20 respondents (the basic information is presented in Table 1), among whom there are 10 females and 10 males, with ages varying from 18 to 30. The interviews adopted a semi-structured design, with questions organized around four dimensions: the respondents' cognition and understanding of the "sports buddy"; the criteria and considerations

they hold when seeking a buddy; their experiences and feelings from firsthand participation; and the influence of buddy socializing on their overall social life. Taking account of each respondent's temporal and spatial arrangements, the interviews were conducted via three modes—Tencent Meeting, voice call, and face-to-face—with an average duration of thirty minutes per interview. For those respondents who discussed important issues in the first round interview or required additional investigation, the researcher conducted a second interview to obtain additional information and confirm the details.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

No.	Gender	Age (yrs)	Province	Occupation	Buddy Type
W1	Female	23	Henan	Public-opinion analyst	Badminton buddy
W2	Female	22	Guangdong	Maternal-and-infant livestreamer	Pilates buddy
M1	Male	25	Shaanxi	Veteran (ex-serviceman)	Running buddy
W3	Female	21	Shandong	Student	Fitness buddy
W4	Female	29	Beijing	University counselor	Swimming buddy
M2	Male	20	Shaanxi	Student	Basketball buddy
M3	Male	24	Hebei	Student	Football (soccer) buddy
M4	Male	18	Henan	Student	Basketball buddy
M5	Male	30	Beijing	University teacher	Badminton buddy
W5	Female	22	Henan	Sales	Dance buddy
M6	Male	25	Beijing	Student	Fitness buddy
M7	Male	27	Jiangsu	Programmer	Billiards buddy
W6	Female	23	Heilongjiang	Unemployed	Skiing buddy
W7	Female	24	Anhui	Kindergarten teacher	Mountaineering buddy
W8	Female	23	Sichuan	New-media operations	Walking buddy
M8	Male	23	Guizhou	Student	Table-tennis buddy
M9	Male	22	Beijing	Student	Fitness buddy
M10	Male	24	Beijing	Product manager	Cycling buddy
W9	Female	26	Henan	Public-institution staff	Yoga buddy
W10	Female	25	Hebei	Craftsperson (artisan)	Skateboarding buddy

4. Types and Characteristics of the “Sports Buddy” among Generation Z Youth

4.1 The Spatiotemporally Reciprocal Type: Precise Companionship in Athletic Settings

"Precise companionship" means dividing the daily tasks into different aspects according to the content, time and place, and seeking suitable companions within certain time periods to satisfy the companionship needs in various divided situations. A 'sports mate' represents this idea in the field of sports; it originates from the common desire for physical exercise and is connected by the condition that they are in the same time and place, thus forming a stable but limited companionship during the short period of

sports. Goffman's concept of 'co-presence' can well describe the working principle of this kind of relationship: the condition for face-to-face communication is that both parties should be in the same time and place environment. For sports activities, this condition is more strict. In badminton, both the court and the partner must be present at the same time, skiing needs to be done in a certain season and location, and cycling is restricted by many factors such as routes, weather and equipment. Sports inherently contain a rigid demand for 'co-temporality and co-spatiality,' which is fundamentally different from social activities like reading, watching movies, or dining, which can be done asynchronously.

Time and space fit alone is not enough to

promote "precise companionship". Common interests and hobbies are another dimension that cannot be ignored. Social psychologist Brem [12] believes that "one of the most basic principles of interpersonal relationships is similarity: liking and attracting each other", and people tend to be close to people who are similar to their own value system. Young people with common sports preferences can quickly establish their identity through "we all like this" without a long test. With the help of the accurate release of time, location and project information on social platforms, the same kind scattered all over the city can be quickly gathered, and social objects can be directly transformed from vague "potential possibilities" to high-probability fits. Furthermore, this precise matching based on similarity brings not only an improvement in social efficiency for Generation Z, but also a stable response at the identity level. In the context of the high anonymity of urban life, young people have long faced a large number of weak strangers who lack common language, and it is difficult to obtain clear identity from them. Through the precise gathering between good people, "which kind of person do I belong to" is repeatedly confirmed in every appointment training, appointment riding, appointment competition, and mutual recognition continues to accumulate. The physical nature of the sports scene further strengthens this process: the same-frequency collaboration of action, rhythm and breathing makes identity not only stay at the language level, but also get an immediate response in the tacit understanding of physical coordination.

4.2 The Relationally Light Type: A Tacitly Understood Strong Sense of Boundaries

Most members of Generation Z think their relations with their 'sports buddies' are 'comfortable', where both sides are well known to each other but do not reach the boundary, keeping a delicate balance of closeness and distance. The basis for this feeling of comfort is the sense of distance kept by mutual understanding, which makes 'sports buddies' different from other kinds of social connections. In order to comprehend how this sense of distance functions, it is necessary to first define the function of 'boundaries' in present day social contacts.

Psher Fehr [13] stated: "The key to keeping lasting and stable friendships is to maintain a

delicate balance, so as to correctly estimate the proper degree and not cross the boundaries." This statement clearly illustrates the operation of 'sports buddies': the process of 'clicking immediately and then stopping after teamwork' is the youth group's new interpretation of 'moderation.' In particular, the concept of boundaries includes two points: the physical distance in a spatial aspect and the psychological distance in an interpersonal aspect. The latter changes with the psychological closeness and remoteness, and in essence, it is the individual's adjustment of his/her own space and relational intimacy in social contacts. Keeping distinct social distances can decrease unnecessary emotional burdens and is also beneficial for maintaining personal independence and autonomy.

Traditional close relationships are mainly based on close ties such as kinship and geographical relations. Sometimes, they may result in behaviors such as emotional dependency, unclear boundaries and privacy infringement, which make the young people deal with many complicated interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the warm emotional contacts gradually turn into restrictions binding each other. Conversely, 'partnered socializing' solves this problem by its light characteristics of relationship. It is simple and convenient, needing little time and energy to keep the relationship. When necessary, a dependable partner will appear and stay in the contact list without bothering others. The timely company during certain periods enables the young people to keep a balance between independence and emotional assistance, thus relieving their psychological pressures and emotional constraints caused by traditional close relationships, which fits the present youth's tendency of minimal socializing and respect for social boundaries.

4.3 The Mutually Beneficial Type: Emotional and Pragmatic Motives Coexisting

"Weak ties" denote the social contacts which are not very intimate and require little investment, formed on unfamiliar social networks for the purpose of obtaining economic advantages and entertainment. In the aspects of information transmission and resource exchange, weak ties are better than strong ties. In modern urban life, the Generation Z youth have limited time and energy which are hard to spend on maintaining strong ties; besides, their isolated living

circumstances lead to widespread loneliness and emotional dissatisfaction. Under the influence of 'time shortage' and 'emotional shortage', the traditional strong ties are not the primary choice any more, and the young people prefer a lighter but emotionally comforting way of social communication. The "sports companion" is an example of this kind of weak tie, in which both sides benefit practically and emotionally from joint participation in sports activities.

From an emotional viewpoint, the 'sports companion' is not only a useful assistant. According to the interactional ritual chain theory put forward by the sociologist Collins [14], when several people gather in one place and focus on the same object while performing coordinated physical activities at the same time, the collective excitement and emotional energy will be stimulated. Sports provide the best conditions for such interactions, like the ball being passed on the field, synchronized breathing during joint sprints and high-fives after the game, which enable two strangers to experience the same emotional rhythm temporarily. In the present society, which is extremely disintegrated, urban youth often feel lonely and isolated. Through the embodied interactions during physical activities, 'Sports Companion' can provide a simple and effective way for young people to obtain emotional support. From a practical aspect, the 'sports partnership' relationship possesses some features of instrumental rationality. On one hand, partners can check each other to enhance the exercise efficiency. On the other hand, with the rapid progress of modern consumption, partnership relationships can reduce the operation costs and promote the sharing of resources. The discounts on gym memberships and special offers on sports equipment are beneficial to the fitness lovers and bring them actual economic advantages.

5. The Causes of the "Sports Buddy" Phenomenon among Generation Z Youth

5.1 The Realistic Dimension: The Advance of an Accelerating Society

The "social acceleration" theory proposed by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa [15] states that modern society is characterized by acceleration in three areas: technological progress, social changes and the pace of life. With the further development of modernization,

the division of labour in society becomes more refined, occupations are diversified and individual lifestyles exhibit great diversity. The distinctions between work, daily life and leisure are gradually fading; time is divided into small portions which make it difficult for Generation Z to allocate particular time for sports activities with their friends or colleagues. Participant W8 expressed this situation truly.

"On each holiday, when others have free time, I am busy with my work. Even on my day off, my friends are still working. Our schedules do not match, so it is difficult for us to meet." (Respondent W8)

Co-existing with this time pressure is the physical and mental fatigue caused by the quickened speed. "Sub-health" symptoms—cervical and lumbar problems caused by prolonged sitting, insomnia and anxiety brought on by accumulated stress—are spreading among young people, compelling them to re-examine the value of the body and pushing physical exercise from an optional item toward a mandatory one. Against this background, a series of public-health and fitness initiatives in recent years—such as the "Healthy China 2030" Planning Outline and policies promoting the integration of sport and education for the healthy development of adolescents—have emphasized the popularization of scientific fitness and health intervention among young people, so that the younger generation may strengthen their will and improve their physical and mental health through exercise. The topic of health has been continually pushed to the center of public attention, further reinforcing Generation Z youth's identification with and commitment to exercise.

Yet a clear tension has formed between the rising willingness to exercise and the high degree of temporal fragmentation—people want to move, but cannot assemble both companions and time. The "Sports Partner" program provides a feasible way to solve this problem: by means of social websites, teenagers can quickly establish contact with those who have the same hobbies and fitness attitudes, transforming unutilized spare time into effective physical exercise periods.

"Due to my busy work schedule, I wish to exercise but cannot find appropriate partners—Sports Partner meets this requirement." (Respondent M7)

From this viewpoint, the time limitations in the rapidly developing society and the sense of health anxiety together urge the Generation Z generation to regard sports as a part of their life style, showing the contemporary youth's dual intention of maintaining a healthy life and establishing social relationships under a tight time arrangement.

5.2 The Technological Dimension: The Precise Recommendation of Algorithmic Matching

Habermas believes that technological rationality has gradually extended from the economic field into all aspects of social life, influencing people's lifestyle and social communication modes. In the process of the growth of "sports companions" aimed at young people, intelligent algorithms illustrate this technological rationality by altering the sports social interaction dynamics through three main aspects: user analysis, geographical matching and data feedback.

The algorithm establishes a precise "person identification" system for the extraction of behavioral data. Social websites gather the users' web browsing history, preference details, interaction frequencies and other electronic trails to recognize their interests and social profiles, and then categorize users with similar topics and common needs through tagging. Respondent W6 pointed out:

A search for the keyword 'sports companion' on Xiaohongshu yields a large number of postings which include various kinds of activities, at least tens of thousands. I have noticed suggestions such as badminton, volleyball, walking and fitness, which facilitate the finding of similar recommendations.

Based on the physical proximity, Location-Based Services (LBS) determine the matching. The "sports companion" model is different from other kinds of communication such as reading or learning, because it depends on the nearness in actual location - only those who live in the same region and have common activity areas can play sports together. Social web sites and fitness plans can find the potential partners around by using their current location information, which can lessen the expenses for organizing face-to-face meetings.

"There are some running partners nearby my house— all of them have been found by Keep's 'People Nearby' function. We can run together

immediately from our house without moving far." (Respondent M3)

Data feedback from wearable devices and fitness softwares has made exercise into a shareable social information, instead of a personal physical activity. The smart bracelets and fitness watches continually record and display significant parameters like the distance travelled, speed and heart rate in real time, enabling the users to easily check their performance and therefore becoming popular among the fitness lovers.

"The cycling app not only tracks your exercise route but also promotes communication with other nearby cyclists, increasing the pleasure of exercise."

Thus, relationships involve communications in daily digital environments, facilitating easier and longer-lasting maintenance.

5.3 The Circle Dimension: The Construction of Belonging through Sports Affinity

Online circle-stratification [16] is a phenomenon and development trend in cyberspace where netizens gather or join certain communities or circles based on their common interests or requirements actively, and carry out information exchange and social communication. Under such circumstances, the inherent communal characteristic of sports activities makes it an important means for the youth's social stratification. The same athletic interests, similar training processes and analogous emotional states facilitate the quick formation of recognizable social groups among strangers. For the Generation Z who have long been in a state of "solo flight" amid an accelerating society and atomized existence, the "sports buddy" bears not only the function of an exercise partner but also that of identity construction and the rebuilding of a sense of belonging. First, sports circles form cultural distinctions through unique linguistic symbols and modes of behavior. Basketball enthusiasts share particular court vocabulary and tacit coordination; fitness groups exchange training plans and dietary advice; running communities are keen on arranging to enter marathons together. These shared linguistic symbols and behavioral patterns continually reinforce group cohesion, making sports circles an important social field for young people.

"My mountaineering buddy and I have so much in common to talk about; discussing training plans and gear is especially congenial." (Respondent W7)

These symbols and tacit understandings, on the one hand, strengthen the sense of connection within the group, and on the other, implicitly draw a line between “insiders” and “outsiders,” allowing young people to fairly quickly confirm their own position within the circle—this is precisely the micro-mechanism by which identity construction takes place. Second, sports circles provide youth in atomized existence with a sense of belonging of the “imagined community” kind. As traditional acquaintance society loosens and the bonds of the work-unit system weaken, Generation Z’s objects of belonging are shifting from blood, geography, and work unit toward interest and lifestyle, and sports circles fill precisely this vacancy.

“After finding a regular buddy at the gym, I feel I have truly integrated into this circle.” (Respondent M9)

The “integration” here already transcends the relationship with any single partner, pointing instead to the overall experience of being accepted by a group with shared passion and a common rhythm—and this sense of being accepted is precisely the emotional resource scarcest for youth in their atomized predicament. Finally, the relationships in the sports community are not limited to the sporting field, affecting daily life through continuous contacts. Friends eat together, talk freely and exchange life experiences, thereby turning their athletic association into ordinary companionship. These seemingly loose, informal connections thus build up a profound sense of community.

5.4 The Individual Dimension: The Urgent Need to Satisfy Emotional Demands

In Motivation and Personality, the American psychologist Maslow proposed that the third and fourth levels of human needs are, respectively, the need for belonging and love and the need for esteem [17]. Emotional needs are an important component of basic human needs, encompassing multiple levels such as love, belonging, respect, and understanding. Across the course of human social development, seeking and constructing interpersonal emotional connections has always been a proposition that individuals continuously pursue. In the past, traditional Chinese society was long characterized by “settled habitation across generations,” forming a network of “acquaintance society” relationships based on the differential mode of association. Within relatively stable social circles, individuals’ needs

for emotional belonging and interpersonal interaction could be satisfied. In the process of modernization, however, people’s mobility has increased, and large numbers of young people have left their hometowns to study or make a living elsewhere. Having departed from a familiar interpersonal environment, Generation Z youth find it difficult to quickly establish deep emotional connections amid fast-paced urban life, facing unprecedented loneliness and emotional deprivation. To fill the void of real-world socializing, youth turn to virtual space in search of social connection, gaining a sense of belonging by joining “interest-based communities” formed around shared hobbies, so as to relieve their own emptiness and loneliness. The “sports buddy” model is precisely how young people conveniently seek exercise partners via online platforms and naturally establish emotional connections in the actual process of exercise, alleviating the loneliness brought by social atomization. For instance, Respondent M1 stated:

“When exercising with my running buddy, although we do not talk much about private matters, that sense of tacit companionship is very warm.” (Respondent M1)

Respondent W8 likewise remarked:

“Living alone in Sichuan, sometimes it is really lonely without friends. Ever since I got a walking buddy, my life has improved a lot. Sometimes she even listens patiently to the trivial details of my life and passes positive energy on to me.” (Respondent W8)

The main advantage of “sports companionship” compared with other kinds of companionship is that physical exercise has physiological effects on regulating emotions and reducing stress, thus giving the participants natural emotional support. This indicates that “Sports Companion” not only satisfies the social contact requirement of young people, but also assists them in building a positive attitude towards life and self-awareness by means of sports, thereby obtaining the dual advantages of meeting emotional needs and improving both physical and mental health.

6. Latent Risks of the “Sports Buddy” among Generation Z Youth and Pathways for Guidance

6.1 Latent Risks

The popularity of the “sports buddy” phenomenon in the social life of Generation Z

indicates the desire of young people for positive emotional contacts and a healthy lifestyle. A comprehensive approach is necessary towards this trend: although it satisfies the individual social requirements of the youth, it inevitably leads to possible problems such as social exhaustion, social loneliness and dissemination of false information. A careful study of these risks helps us to have a rational attitude towards the phenomenon and offers useful suggestions for the improvement of the management systems of relevant social websites and for guiding the young people to establish healthy sports-related social relationships.

6.1.1 “Social Addiction” and “Social Burnout”

According to the media dependency theory, 'social addiction' refers to a behavioral dependency pattern developed by people in the online social environment because of the satisfaction of needs like information obtaining and emotional contact, showing traits of high involvement and inability to self-regulate. In contrast, “social burnout” refers to the decline of interest in social activities and the intensification of situational anxiety triggered by the depletion of psychological resources amid prolonged social interaction. In the practice of the sports buddy, out of loneliness and curiosity about buddy relationships, young people often frequently change buddies or maintain multiple buddy relationships at the same time, enjoying the social satisfaction the sports buddy brings. Respondent W3, for instance, stated:

“Sometimes I feel one fitness buddy is not enough; I always want to find more buddies to exercise with.” (Respondent W3)

Yet as the social scope continually expands, the network of social relationships that Generation Z youth must handle grows ever more complex. In this process, young people develop a feeling of weariness toward these social activities and begin to long for a return to their own space, whereupon a phase of social burnout appears. Respondent M6 noted:

“At first I found it novel to look for buddies; gradually I felt that having to arrange a time and find a place every time, and also keep the chat atmosphere going, was exhausting.” (Respondent M6)

Notably, this burnout is not a persistent state. Over time, when loneliness strikes again, the individual will once more form the desire to seek a sports buddy. Cycling back and forth in this way, oscillating repeatedly between the two

extremes of “craving socializing” and “rejecting socializing,” this bipolar swing leaves young people physically and mentally exhausted, unable to stabilize an originally regular life rhythm, and consequently making it difficult to establish a stable and lasting exercise habit.

6.1.2 The solidification of barriers between sports circles

Circle barriers refer to the informational obstacles that separate different groups, such that common sense within a circle is hard for outsiders to comprehend, and information and resources cannot circulate among circles, forming one relatively closed social circle after another. Although the “sports buddy” provides Generation Z youth with a convenient mode of athletic socializing, it can also readily form closed social circles. This study found that when contemporary youth socialize through the “sports buddy” mode, there is a widespread tendency to confine social activities to a specific activity, making it difficult to break through the boundaries of the athletic domain to expand their social scope. Behind this phenomenon lies the constraint that circle barriers impose on youth social activities. On the one hand, youth long confined within the closed loop of the athletic domain, lacking opportunities to contact individuals of different cultural backgrounds and social attributes, find the diversity of their social horizons and interpersonal relationships severely restricted.

“Apart from playing badminton, my badminton buddy and I have very little other overlap. I feel my social circle is getting narrower and narrower.” (Respondent W1)

On the other hand, continual immersion in a single social circle exposes youth to problems of inadequate experience and insufficient skill when interacting with heterogeneous groups, so that when facing broader social contexts they readily develop social discomfort and difficulty adapting. Respondent M3 once remarked:

“At non-sports gatherings, I have no idea how to start a conversation. After a few words with others, the conversation goes cold, and I can only awkwardly play with my phone. It is extremely uncomfortable.” (Respondent M3)

This authentic experience mirrors the negative impact of closed social circles on the cultivation of youth social competence and on adaptation to diverse social scenarios.

6.1.3 The discernment of false information

At present, the “sports buddy,” with its

convenient and flexible features, has rapidly become popular among exercise-loving Generation Z youth. Yet, like two sides of a coin, while bringing convenience the “sports buddy” also brings many safety hazards, especially regarding the discernment and detection of false information.

In an internet age of information explosion, people rashly arrange offline meetings with strangers on the basis of only a few words of self-introduction on a platform, or a handful of retouched exercise photos. This rapid mode of acquaintance lowers the cost of getting to know the other party while also lowering the cost of breaking commitments. Without in-depth understanding, we cannot judge the other party’s true identity, character, and credibility, which makes “mishaps” a frequent occurrence. Being stood up, having appointments broken, verbal frictions, and disputes involving money may all play out in “sports-buddy socializing.” Worse still, some unscrupulous merchants have set their sights on this domain, exploiting “sports-buddy culture” for precise marketing and carrying out various fraudulent activities. Taking the college-student population as an example, they are keen to share fitness costs and lower expenses through “buddy socializing.” Yet many risks lurk behind this convenience. Respondent M9 said:

“I once met a buddy who claimed to be a professional coach, but after we met he immediately began selling courses. I reacted quickly at the time, which is the only reason I did not waste money.” (Respondent M9)

Moreover, some lawbreakers exploit young people’s natural trust toward fellow enthusiasts, carefully designing athletic traps and posing threats to personal safety. Therefore, how to establish an effective information-review mechanism and enhance users’ capacity for information discernment has become a key issue in safeguarding the healthy development of the sports buddy.

6.2 Pathways for Guidance

Faced with the various problems that Generation Z youth encounter in the practice of the “sports buddy,” we should proceed from such aspects as returning to reality, breaking through circles, and the digital environment, providing appropriate guidance and support for Generation Z’s “sports-buddy socializing,” and helping young people establish healthy and rational

interpersonal relationships.

6.2.1 Returning to real life and reclaiming the intimate relationships of the “Nearby”

Today, in the subconscious of many young people, the neighborhood and the nearby space that serve as venues of everyday interaction are gradually vanishing; they have lost their perception of the “nearby,” able to hold forth on online events that have nothing to do with them yet knowing little about matters in their own vicinity. Young people living a digital existence may know the gossip of celebrity bloggers but not the names of their own neighbors. According to a 2025 community survey by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development [18], the proportion of people nationwide who can accurately name three neighbors has fallen to 19 percent—a sharp decline of 56 percentage points compared with 2015—and this phenomenon is even more pronounced among Generation Z youth. It is precisely because of distrust toward nearby socializing that Generation Z youth’s desire and action to seek sports buddies in virtual space deepen. The anthropologist Xiang [19] holds that, in an atomized society, people should take the “nearby” as the center for understanding the world; one may focus on the “first 500 meters”—that is, starting from the individual, looking at the 500 meters around us and perceiving the real world. It cannot be ignored that the phenomena of “social addiction” and “social burnout” produced as Generation Z youth tirelessly seek sports buddies online are in essence youth’s lack of nearby relationships, trapped in satisfying social needs online. To untangle this psychological predicament, Generation Z youth need to proactively adjust their athletic-social strategies, pay more attention to real life, and seek partners among the intimate relationships around them.

Concretely, this can be advanced along two dimensions. On the one hand, by “activating the social granularity of the 500 meters,” one can realize a concrete attention to real life—focusing on the people, things, and spaces perceptible around oneself to rebuild a capacity to perceive the “nearby,” for instance by proactively participating in sports-related public activities within the community or campus, attending to the exercise habits and needs of those around one in search of resonance, and giving priority to nearby athletic settings for daily exercise. On the contrary, the sports partners in close relationships should be systematically

investigated by 'establishing trust connections actively.' First of all, for those groups which already have a high level of trust, like families, close friends and roommates, a method including 'light pressure invitations' and 'personalized activity adjustment' can be used to effectively encourage their participation. Secondly, for the groups with low trust, for example, neighbors and classmates in the same major, it is important to provide them with chances to join in third-party activities firstly, and gradually establish a basis of trust through common experiences. Moreover, more positive responses should be given to the other person in these close relationships. This can not only continually motivate mutual participation but also strengthen the emotional ties, making the partners become compatible 'ideal companions.' By practicing the above methods systematically, the members of Generation Z can gradually decrease their dependence on virtual 'sports partners' and instead develop a more stable, healthy and sustainable social exercise system in real life.

6.2.2 Persisting in breaking barriers and integrating circles to broaden Youth's social horizons

Constrained by human nature, or rather by intellectual inertia, people tend to be more inclined to encounter information that conforms to their own interests and standpoints, and prefer to remain in circles where they feel comfortable; the development of information technology has reinforced this tendency. Imperceptibly, the information youth are exposed to grows ever narrower, and they can no longer distinguish what is "the truth" and what is "the real situation." It is highly dangerous for youth to become overly immersed in their personal "comfort zone," holding forth to others about the informational field with which they are familiar, as though forgetting what is meant by "rationality." Whether in terms of value guidance or of the development of the individual youth, "breaking barriers and integrating circles" is a topic of considerable practical significance.

First, truly healthy circle socializing should be socializing with "circles" but without "barriers"—socializing in which different circles can both maintain their relative independence and individuality and consciously step out of their comfort zones and echo chambers. As individuals, young people should not be confined within narrow thinking, like a "frog at the bottom of a well" trapping themselves within

a single circle and communicating only with people who share one field or one hobby. Youth should face society with an open and absorptive attitude, attend to broader public affairs, proactively engage with society's mainstream value system, and promote the integration of shared social values with the core values of their own group, making them a consensual basis that links different circles and promotes common development. Second, the individual youth should clearly recognize that, whether it be the "sports buddy" or other types such as the "study buddy" or "foodie buddy," all are in essence a balance between real life and virtual space, achieving a win-win outcome. To this end, Generation Z should boldly step out of the sports circle, communicate broadly with other social groups, draw on and absorb the needed positive energy and knowledge, and enhance their own comprehensive abilities. For example, high-school students may, while persisting in physical exercise, take the lead in forming subject-based mutual-aid groups, relieving academic pressure while cultivating an awareness of teamwork and benign competition through mutual help; college students may, by means of interdisciplinary societies and local youth organizations, actively participate in projects such as "innovation training camps" and "rural revitalization practice initiatives," deepening their insight into and understanding of social issues in fields of practice; and for young people newly entering the workplace, proactively joining industry communities and regularly attending lectures and seminars that combine online and offline formats will become an important avenue for expanding networks and broadening horizons. This series of conscious acts of "barrier-breaking" will help youth build more diverse and resilient social capital, gaining more multidimensional and sustainable momentum for development in an uncertain age, and achieving the leap from "the physically strong" to "the all-round grower."

6.2.3 Purifying the social space and strengthening the ecological governance of the digital environment

Youth need the edification of a sound social environment in the process of socializing. Self-media platforms have become a key form through which youth obtain important information; the internet is the very root of the occurrence and development of Generation Z youth "buddy" socializing, as well as the key

venue for the provision and dissemination of its information. Therefore, to purify the social space of youth “buddy” socializing, the key lies in regulating and guiding the online ecology on which it depends. First, the supervision of various communication media must be strengthened. As an important carrier of information dissemination, media wield powerful influence in cyberspace, exerting a subtle, guiding effect especially on the cognitive shaping, value judgment, and social behavior of youth. To eliminate at the root the harm that unsound social media inflict on the social ecology of youth, it is necessary to cultivate a positive and constructive online culture, encourage content that conveys truth, goodness, and beauty in ways that youth enjoy, and foster a clean and healthy social-ecological environment. Operational supervision should be conducted over platforms related to “buddy” socializing so as to build a healthy social ecology. In recent years, a number of laws and regulations applicable to cyberspace—such as provisions on the governance of the online information content ecosystem and regulations on the online protection of minors—have clarified the principal responsibilities of platforms, required the improvement of content-review mechanisms, and strengthened the regulated management of new technologies such as algorithmic recommendation and synthetic media. Within this rule-of-law framework, regulatory measures for the emerging social mode of the “buddy” need to be made more precise. Relevant platforms should establish routine internal self-inspection and compliance-improvement mechanisms, and, with respect to risks latent in “buddy” socializing—such as privacy leakage, cyberbullying, and the spread of harmful content—formulate fine-grained, enforceable management rules, thereby constructing a governance pattern in which regulation in accordance with the law and active platform self-discipline advance in concert.

Youth are the principal users of digital social space, and their cyber-literacy directly affects the overall atmosphere of that space. Statistical reports on internet development indicate that youth and minor netizens constitute a massive population and an important source of new netizens. As “digital natives,” although they are familiar with the operation of digital technology, their worldview, outlook on life, and values are at a critical formative stage; faced with complex

online information and social environments, their literacy in information discernment, rational expression, and cybersecurity protection still urgently needs strengthening. Against this background, education authorities have in recent years continually advanced cyber-civilization and media-literacy education in universities, and broader social guidance has emphasized efforts to enhance the cyber-literacy of adolescents, helping youth form a civilized and healthy mode of online life. Evidently, strengthening cyber-literacy education for youth is not merely a measure to enhance individual capacity but, more importantly, an essential foundational project for maintaining order in digital social space, advancing the construction of cyber civilization, and safeguarding digital security—of irreplaceable strategic significance for building a clean, healthy, and orderly online ecology.

7. Conclusion

“Fitness buddy,” “workout buddy,” and “badminton buddy” remain online buzzwords at the present stage. The “sports buddy” socializing popular among youth is in essence a new mapping of interpersonal communication onto social-media platforms; it embodies Generation Z youth’s distinctive preference for, and fervent pursuit of, the combination of exercise and socializing. We should recognize that, propelled by factors such as social acceleration, technological progress, and individual needs, traditional modes and conceptions of socializing are no longer suited to Generation Z—an inevitable result of social development and the renewal of the times. Yet however many positive, facilitative roles “sports-buddy” socializing may play, its latent hazards cannot be ignored. We should view the convenience brought by “sports-buddy” socializing rationally, taking care to maintain moderate participation and avoiding dependence or burnout caused by an excessive pursuit of social efficiency; we should make good use of weak ties to expand social circles while consciously engaging in cross-circle exchange to promote richer social connection; and when obtaining online information, we should also enhance our capacity for discernment, verify the authenticity of information with a prudent attitude, and cultivate healthy and sustainable social habits. Only by continually taking effective measures to guide Generation Z will young people establish

healthy and meaningful athletic-social relationships and push the “sports buddy” model toward a higher-quality and more sustainable direction.

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