

From the Stands to TIKTOK: The Transformation of Football Fandom in Digital Space

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze and understand the transformation of cheering from traditional stadium spaces to digital spaces, particularly social media platforms, with a focus on the new patterns of interaction created by the virtual environment. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach (quantitative–qualitative), using a questionnaire administered to a purposive sample of 86 young university students at the University of El-Oued. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS software, while qualitative data were analyzed through TIFO image analysis using MAXQDA software. The findings revealed a gradual shift in cheering practices from physical presence in stadiums to digital interaction on social media platforms, driven by the easy accessibility of sports content, its rapid circulation, and the attractiveness of visual and symbolic interaction within the digital space.

Keywords: Interaction; analysis; football; social media; students.

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I- Introduction :

Football is one of the most popular sports worldwide and attracts significant attention across different social groups. Football cheering inside stadiums represents a key element in supporting teams and enhancing the competitive atmosphere. It contributes to creating an environment of enthusiasm through various forms of interaction such as chants, applause, songs, and visual expressions of support. Recently, football-cheering practices have undergone significant transformation with the rise of digital platforms. Cheering content is now widely shared through short videos on social media platforms, particularly on TikTok, where fans interact with football-related content through viewing, liking, commenting, and sharing. These interactions reflect new forms of digital participation in football culture. Therefore, the importance of this study lies in exploring the forms of digital engagement (viewing, liking, and commenting) within football-related content and understanding how football cheering is transformed from stadium-based practices into digital interactions.

1-The problem of the study:

How did football fans move from stadiums to TikTok ?

Sub-questions:

What are the patterns of TikTok use among university students when following sports content?

How do university students interact with sports cheerleading videos via TikTok?

What are the reasons that led to the shift from cheering from stadiums to digital via TikTok?

How are football cheerleading symbols, especially the "TIFO", transmitted from the stands to social media?

2-Hypothesis:

TikTok contributes to the transition of football cheering from inside stadiums to the digital space.

Sub-hypotheses:

Students use TikTok to follow sports content in a variety of ways.

Digital interaction contributes to strengthening the mass identity of young people.

Transferring football cheerleading symbols such as "TIFO" from the stands to the digital space.

3-Study objectives :

The current study aims to understand how university students (youth) interact with videos promoting football.

Knowing the reasons for the shift from stadiums, actual presence, to moving to digital platforms via the TikTok application.

Trying to understand and explain the phenomenon of digital cheering and the shift from stadiums to virtual reality in light of symbolic interactive theory

Revealing the transformation of "TIFO" from an encouraging practice on the field to visual content circulated across digital platforms.

3- The concept and characteristics of Tik Tok:

The rapid advancement of technology and the widespread use of the Internet have made social media platforms and aspect of life for many individuals. These platforms allow people to interact, interact, and communicate with each other instantly regardless of their location. (Cagatin, 2024)

Digital platforms share three basic characteristics: they are technology-driven, enable interaction between user groups, and allow those groups to perform specific tasks.(Bonina.et al.2021)

TikTok is one of the most popular applications worldwide, and was developed by ByteDance after the launch of the first version, Douyin. By July 2021, the app had achieved nearly three billion downloads, according to Statist a data. In, the number of active users reached 99.1 million as of April 2022, according to DataIndonesia.id, becoming the second largest user base after United. The application continues to develop by adding new features to enhance media interaction, most notably live broadcasting (Live Streaming) (Melani& Zamzamy, 2023)

TikTok enriches people's lives with its massive flow of information and ease of use, creating a convenient online communication platform for users. Users live their real-life experiences within specific spaces, interact with the people, objects and scenes surrounding them, and then document these experiences through short videos published on the platform, accompanied by topics and hashtags (hashtags). These clips are then promoted via a big data system to attract more likes, comments, and reposts by those interested in the same content, allowing a greater number of users "presence" within those digital spaces Yang et al(2022). (Liu, et al.2022).

TikTok combines music, text, and video to deliver engaging audiovisual entertainment content. The platform also provides content creators with a set of integrated tools that contribute to spreading digital knowledge and promoting the collaborative Exchange of ideas. Similar to other social media platforms like Twitter, the comments section allows for text replies. However, TikTok offers the added advantage of being able to respond to text comments via videos, allowing for more in-depth discussions that combine audio and video. With this feature, the content creator can create a new video that includes the original comment in the form of a speech balloon within the clip.(MacKinnon ,et al.2021)

4-Previous studies:

First study: The study consisted of understanding sports brand communities on social media and social capital. The title of the study is Fenton et al (2023). "Understanding sporting social media brand communities, place and social capital: A netnography of football fans."

Second study: These findings reveal how digital spaces function not as isolated environments, but as interconnected emotional ecosystems vulnerable to infection across domains caused by real-world events. The title of the study is: Hill, M. (2025) "Catching Stray Balls: Football, fandom, and the impact on digital discourse."

Differences: Unlike previous studies, the current study focuses on a purposive sample of college students who follow football-related cheerleading videos on TikTok. The study also relies on a mixed methods approach by combining quantitative questionnaire data analyzed using SPSS with qualitative visual analysis of football "TIFO" using MAXQDA.

Research gap: Few sociological studies have examined the shift in football chanting from stadium practices to digital interaction on short video platforms such as TikTok, particularly among university students in the Arab context. In addition, limited research has combined quantitative audience analysis with qualitative visual analysis of tifo and symbolic encouragement practices.

5-Theoretical approaches:

His theory of symbolic interactionism can also help us understand the sense of self that a person feels and how he constructs his current and changing identity. Individuals see themselves through social interactions with and in relation to others. (Brooks, 2023)

II– Methods and Materials:

1-Methodologies:

Type of study: The study is mixed quantitative qualitative.

The adopted approach: the descriptive approach to analysing the phenomenon.

Study sample: We relied on a purposive sample of college students who use TikTok.

Tool used : Use SPSS and MAXQDA

2-Scope of the study:

Temporal scope: The study was conducted in the second semester of the university season (2025/2026)

Spatial scope: El-Oued University students (males-females) in addition to the image of "Tifo" on the Internet.

Study population: Use a questionnaire to collect data from the study sample. The questionnaire includes a set of questions. Use the triple Likert scale.

The Bolzad youth tifo of the match between Bolzad and Zamalek was chosen as the intended sample for analysis.

3-Analysis categories:

Visual symbols through a set of indicators: colors, characters, and logos.

Communication messages, which is through the challenge indicator - collective identity - strength

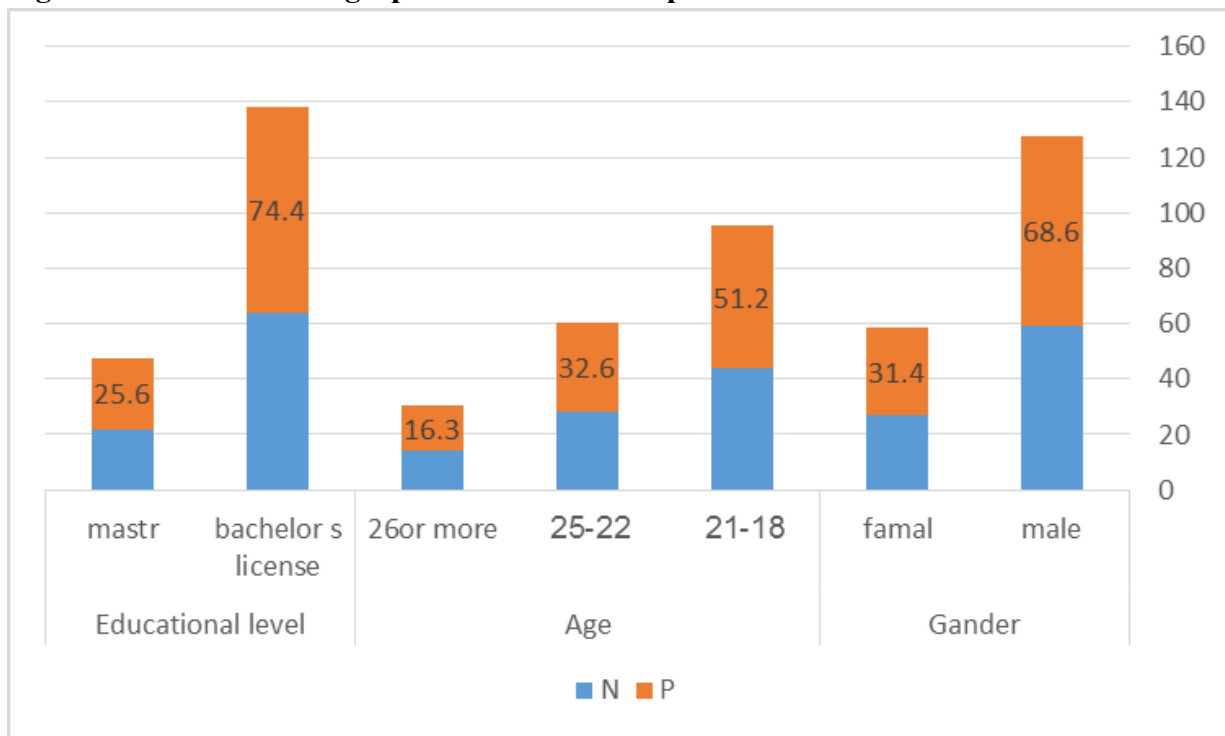
Finally, digital interaction through reposting, comments, and dissemination.

III- Results and discussion :

1. Results of the study:

1-1Demographic data:

Figure 1 shows the demographic data of the sample members:



Source : Prepared by the researcher

Figure 1 shows the results of the study sample with regard to the gender variable, with the percentage of males being (68.6%) compared to (31.4%) females, which can be explained by the higher interest of males in sports content and football encouragement compared to females. In terms of age group, it was found that most of the sample members belonged to the age group (18–21 years) at a rate of (51.2%), followed by the group (22–25 years) at a rate of (32.6%), while the group over 26 years came at a rate of (16.3%). This distribution reflects the youthful nature of the sample, which is in line with the nature of TikTok users. Regarding the academic level, the results showed that a large percentage of the sample members were from the bachelor's level (74.4%), compared to (25.6%) from the master's level.

Table 1. Sample population's opinion on how long they use TikTok daily:

valid	Frequency	Percent
Less than an hour	35	40.7
From one to two hours	24	27.9
3 hours or more	27	31.4
total	86	100

Source: Prepared by the researcher

The results of the table show that the largest group of students spend less than an hour a day on the TikTok application (40.7%), which indicates that use by a significant portion of the sample remains limited in terms of time. The percentage of those who spend three hours or more reached (31.4%), which is a significant percentage that reflects the presence of a category of heavy users of the application, while the category of use from one to two hours recorded a percentage (27.9%), which indicates a gradient in levels of use among members of the sample.

Table 2. Opinion of the concerned individuals about watching football cheerleading videos

valid	Frequency	Percent
Always	25	29.1
sometimes	34	39.5
rarely	27	31.4
total	86	100

Source: Prepared by the researcher

The results of this table show that most of the sample members follow football support videos via the application irregularly, with the “Sometimes” category recording the highest percentage (39.5%), while the percentage of those who follow these videos regularly reached (29.1%), which is an average percentage indicating the presence of a category continuously interested in support content. The category “rarely” was also recorded (31.4%).

Table 3. Explains the digital interaction of research sample members:

Statement	Agree(n/%)	Neutral(n/%)	Disagree(n/%)
I get excited when I watch cheerleading videos for football	63(%73.3)	20(%23.3)	3 (%3.5)

matches			
I tend to interact (like or comment) with these encouraging videos	52(%60.5)	27(%31.1)	7(%8.1)
Digital interaction makes me feel like I'm part of the audience	35(%40.7)	28(%32.6)	23(%26.7)
Best follow football match cheerleading on TikTok	23(%26.7)	36(%41.9)	27(%31.4)

Note: N=Number of respondents. % =Percentage.

The results of the table show that digital interaction via an application is uneven, with the first statement recording the highest approval rate of 73.3. Which indicates a strong interaction, and the second statement showed an approval rate of 60.5%

As for the third statement, it showed a 26.7% disapproval of the interaction.

Table 4. Shows symbols and meanings in public encouragement

Statement	Agree (n/%)	Neutral (n/%)	Disagree (n/%)
Flags and national colors in football matches enhance the sense of belonging	71 (%82.6)	11(%12.8)	4(%4.7)
Group chants and movements express the unity of the audience	63(%73.3)	17(%19.8)	6(%7)

Note: N=Number of respondents. % =Percentage.

The results of the table related to symbols and meanings in public encouragement showed a significant increase in approval rates, reaching (82.6%) in the first statement, and (73.3%) in the second statement, which indicates a strong awareness among students of the importance of symbols (such as flags, colors, and chants) in enhancing the sense of collective belonging. While neutrality rates remain relatively limited (12.8% and 19.8%), with a clear decrease in disapproval rates (4.7% and 7%).

Table 5. Shifting from realistic encouragement to digital interaction.

Statement	Agree (n/%)	Neutral (n/%)	Disagree (n/%)
Encouragement is actually more	68(%79.1)	12(%14)	6(%7)

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impactful than digital			
Digital encouragement is more widespread than actual	44 (%51.2)	23 (%26.7)	19(%22.1)

Note: N=Number of respondents. % =Percentage.

The results of the table from realistic encouragement to digital interaction show variation in students' attitudes. The first statement recorded a high approval rate of (79.1%), which indicates a clear adherence to the importance of encouragement in reality, while the approval rate in the second statement decreased to (51.2%), with a noticeable increase in the rates of neutrality (26.7%) and disapproval (22.1%), and this indicates that the shift towards digital is still ongoing.

Table 6. Reasons for switching to digital encouragement

Statement	Agree (n/%)	Neutral (n/%)	Disagree (n/%)
I prefer to follow football match encouragement on TikTok because of the ease of access	32 (%37.2)	35(%40.7)	19(%22.1)
The difficulty of being on the field forces me to follow the digital cheering	61(%70.9)	22(%25.6)	3(%3.5)
Short videos make cheering more fun	57(%66.3)	17(%19.8)	12(%14)

Note: N=Number of respondents. % =Percentage.

The results of the table show that the reasons for switching to digital encouragement vary in students' assessment of the influencing factors. The first statement recorded an average approval rate (37.2%) compared to an increase in neutrality (40.7%), which indicates the difference in students' experiences in interpreting it.

The second statement also recorded the highest approval rate (70.9%), with a significant decrease in disapproval (3.5%), indicating a near consensus on the importance of this factor in pushing students towards digital encouragement. The third statement showed a high approval rate (66.3%), due to ease of use or attractiveness of the content.

Table 7. how do you often react?

valid	Frequency	Percent
View only	49	57
Like	31	36
Comment	6	7
total	86	100

Source: Prepared by the researcher

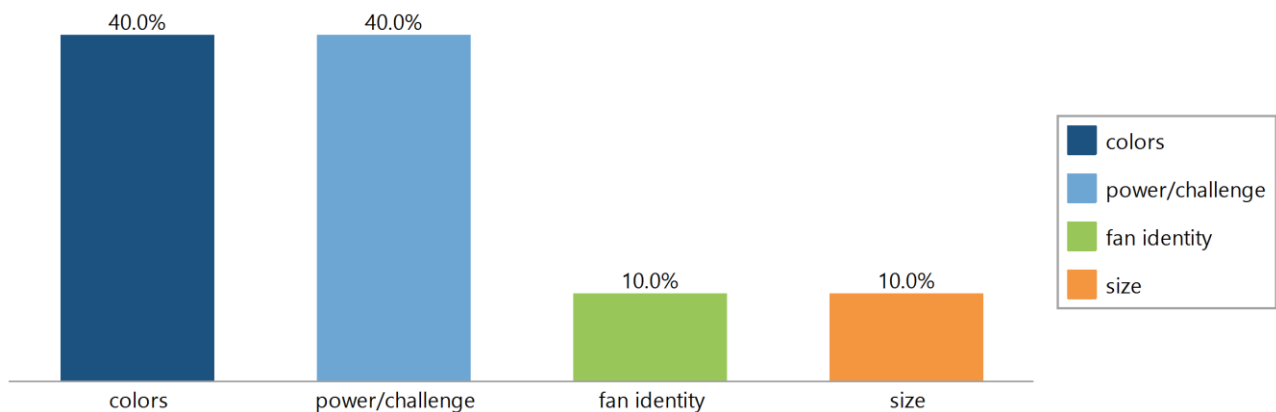
The results of the table related to the actual behavior of interacting with encouragement videos show that the majority of students are content with watching only (57%), compared to (36%) who are content with liking, while the percentage of those who comment decreases to (7%), which indicates limited interaction.

Table 8 Have you ever-posted encouraging content

valid	Frequency	Percent
Yes	28	32.6
No	58	67.4
total	86	100

Source: Prepared by the researcher

The results of the table on content production indicate that a large percentage of students (67.4%) do not participate in publishing encouraging content, compared to only (32.6%) who had previously published this type of content, which reflects behavior that depends more on reception than participation.

Figure 2: Distribution of visual analysis categories using MAXQDA

Visual analysis of the "TIFO" using the "MAXQDA" program showed the dominance of three colors, with orange appearing more frequently in its shades, and black and white appearing less frequently in the background. Orange and black create a strong visual impact, linked to enthusiasm, energy and a kind of challenge. In addition, at the level of symbolic connotations, the symbol of strength emerged clearly through the presence of elements such as the hammer and the iron chain, which shows that the image reflects the discourse of strength and challenge on the field. As we can see in terms of size, the analysis showed that the "TIFO" occupied a large space in the stands, which reflects an attempt to impose a strong presence of fans inside the stadium. It also puts psychological pressure on the players in the opposing team.

Discuss the results:

- ❖ -The study results showed that most students spend less than an hour per day on TikTok (40.7%), which indicates the limited duration of use for a significant portion of the sample.
- ❖ -The results also showed that football encouragement videos are followed irregularly, with the "Sometimes" category recording the highest percentage.(%39.5) .
- ❖ - The results also revealed the presence of emotional and symbolic interaction with the encouraging content as most of the respondents expressed their feeling of excitement when watching videos encouraging football matches at a rate of (73.3%), while (60.5%) showed a tendency to interact with these videos by liking or commenting. The results also showed that digital interaction contributes to enhancing the sense of belonging to the audience among a percentage of students.(%40.7) .
- ❖ -At the level of mass symbols, the results showed that national flags and colors enhance the sense of belonging at a high rate of (82.6%), and most members of the sample considered that chants and collective movements express the unity of the public at a rate of.(%73.3)
- ❖ - As for the comparison between real and digital encouragement, the results showed that the majority of students believe that on-field encouragement is more influential than digital encouragement at a rate of (79.1%), compared to (51.2%) considering that digital encouragement is more widespread. Some students also attributed their preference to following encouragement via TikTok to the ease of access to content (37.2%), in addition to the difficulty of being on the field pushing them to follow digital cheering (70.9%).
- ❖ -The results also showed that short video clips make cheering more enjoyable for a significant percentage of the respondents (66.3%). Regarding the actual behavior of the interaction, it was found that the majority of students were content with just watching without active participation (57%). The results of the study also revealed that a large percentage of students do not participate in producing or publishing encouraging content, as this category reached (67.4%).

- ❖ The results indicate that the shift towards digital encouragement is mainly related to ease of access and attractiveness of content, in addition to the difficulty of being in stadiums for some university students.
- ❖ Results according to symbolic interactionism theory: The colors and visual symbols within the "TIFO" represent common meanings among fans, as they are used to express strength, belonging, and mass identity within the sports space.
- ❖ Students' interaction with TikTok cheerleading videos can be explained in light of symbolic interactionism, as they participate in football cheerleading through digital interaction with symbols and chants.

IV- Conclusion:

The study results demonstrate that football cheering is witnessing clear transformations in the context of the digital environment, as it is no longer limited to the traditional space within stadiums, but rather extends to digital spaces via the TikTok application, especially among university students. The results showed that interaction with sports content is not limited to viewing only, but also includes emotional and symbolic dimensions related to the feeling of belonging to the mass group. TIFO analysis using MAXQDA also showed that visual symbols such as colors, elements of strength and challenge, and large size within the stands play an important role in producing a mass visual discourse that reflects identity and belonging and enhances collective presence. This symbolic discourse has contributed to explaining how these elements move from the real space to the digital space via social media platforms.

From an interactive perspective, football cheering is understood as a process of producing symbolic meanings that are circulated and reshaped through interaction between individuals, whether on the field or across, digital spaces, where symbols (cheers, colors, images) play an essential role in building mass identity.

The importance of this study is highlighted by the fact that it adopted a mixed methodological approach, combining quantitative analysis using SPSS and qualitative analysis of visual images, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the transformations that football encouragement is experiencing in the digital age.

Finally, the study recommends the need to expand the study of this topic to other social groups, and in different digital contexts, in order to deepen understanding of the sociological transformations associated with sports encouragement, especially in light of the increasing influence of digital platforms on patterns of public interaction and the reproduction of sports symbols.

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