

Research on the Sustainable Development Path of the Fencing Sports Industry from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Field Theory

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Abstract: As an Olympic advantage sport in China, fencing has seen continuous growth in participation in recent years, yet its industrial development still faces numerous challenges. This paper employs Bourdieu's Field Theory as an analytical framework, utilizing research methods including policy text analysis, field visits to clubs, and stakeholder interviews, to analyze the field structure, forms of capital, and their interactive logic within the current Chinese fencing industry. The study divides the fencing industry into four sub-fields: professional competitive sports, mass fitness consumption, sports education and training, and sports manufacturing and technology. It analyzes the forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) within each sub-field and their dynamic interaction mechanisms. The research finds: (1) The professional competitive field relies on the symbolic capital of event IP and star athletes, but commercial development is insufficient. (2) The mass consumption field is constrained by technical barriers and equipment costs, necessitating a reduction in the difficulty of acquiring cultural capital. (3) The education and training field faces issues of coach shortage and high training costs, requiring optimization of the talent supply system. (4) The manufacturing and technology field needs to enhance trust in the technology of domestic equipment and strengthen industry-university-research collaborative innovation. Based on the logic of capital interaction between fields, this paper proposes: (1) Using the professional competitive field as a leader to activate the mass consumption and education and training fields. (2) Utilizing the mass consumption field to feedback into and support the professional competitive and product manufacturing/technology fields. (3) Employing the education and training field as a link to connect the professional competitive and manufacturing/technology fields. (4) Building on the manufacturing and technology field as a foundation to support the integrated development strategy for upgrading the entire industry chain, providing theoretical reference and practical pathways for the sustainable development of the fencing industry.

Keywords: Bourdieu's Field Theory; Fencing Industry; Capital Interaction; Sustainable Development; Sports Economy

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1. Theoretical Intervention and Its Applicability

Field Theory was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most internationally influential contemporary French sociologists, and applied to sociological research. He believed that "only by delving into the experienced, historically situated reality of particularity can one understand the deepest logic of the social world" ^[1]. From the perspective of Bourdieu's Field Theory, various fields (e.g., cultural field, economic field, political field) are, to a certain extent, both relatively independent and interrelatedly interactive; no social phenomenon can exist independently without interference

from other fields^[2]. It follows that the sports field is composed of multiple fields such as the sports economic field, sports industry field, sports education field, and sports cultural field. Research by relevant scholars also indicates that identifying the boundaries of each field is significant for exploring the internal limits of fields and new modes of interaction with capital from other fields^[2]. This suggests that using a “comprehensive field” perspective to examine issues can help us see beyond the phenomena of the fencing industry’s development difficulties to the essence of the factors causing its stagnation. This also aligns with Bourdieu’s assertion that the true object of social science is not the individual; the field is fundamental and must be the focus of research operations^[3]. Therefore, applying “Field” theory to the study of the sustainable development of China’s fencing industry possesses inherent rationality.

2. Division of the Fencing Industry Field

Existing research by scholars indicates that, under Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective, sports research can be confined within a specific spatiotemporal scope, using “sports teaching field,” “sports competition field,” “sports leisure field,” and “sports economic field” as intermediary variables to explore the operational logic of social relations within them. As this paper aims to explore the sustainable development path of the fencing industry, the “sports economic field” is selected as the main research direction, and an attempt is made to subdivide this field further.

For the sports industry field, it is essentially an experiment in “capital redistribution,” which uses policy tools to weaken administrative monopoly capital, strengthen the dominance of economic and cultural capital, and thereby reconstruct the rules of the field. In Bourdieu’s sociological theory, capital is not merely “material wealth” in the economic sense; it is a broad concept of “resources” that can be converted into power and status within the social field. He categorized capital into four types: “economic capital,” “cultural capital,” “social capital,” and “symbolic capital”^[3]. From the perspective of Bourdieu’s Field Theory, these four types of capital possess characteristics of dynamic conversion and competition across different fields. Therefore, viewing the core goal of future sports industry development from the angle of “capital redistribution,” and combining it with Bourdieu’s Field Theory, the “sports economic field” can be further subdivided into four sub-fields: “professional competitive sports field,” “mass fitness consumption field,” “sports education and training field,” and “sports manufacturing and technology field.”

3. Analysis of Fencing Industry Field Development

3.1. Professional Competitive Sports Field

The Chinese Fencing Association (CFA) was established in May 1973. It is a group member of the All-China Sports Federation, a national sports association recognized by the Chinese Olympic Committee, and the sole legitimate organization representing China in various fencing activities and in international organizations such as the International Fencing Federation (FIE) and the Asian Fencing Federation^[4]. This also indicates that both fencing enthusiasts and elite athletes must register with the CFA to participate in competitions at various levels, both domestic and international. Similarly, the number of registered members, registered groups, and international competition results determine the scale and development level of the CFA. According to inquiries on the CFA official website, its funding sources indicate that its revenue model primarily relies on the participant population base and the sport’s influence. The population base and project influence are mutually reinforcing: the participant population directly provides economic capital for the fencing industry, while the association’s development provides solid social capital guarantee for the fencing industry.

3.2. Mass Fitness Consumption Field

In 2024, Wang Haibin, President of the Chinese Fencing Association and head coach of the Chinese national fencing team, mentioned in an interview that by the end of 2023, there were 1,290 fencing clubs in China. In the same year, 81 fencing competitions were organized domestically, with 29,238 fencers participating nationwide^[5]. This indicates that fencing in

China already has a certain population base and consumer group. Subsequent field visits revealed that most competitions at various levels include “mass category” participation teams. These include retired athletes and coaches with professional fencing training backgrounds, as well as adults without systematic professional training. Understanding the motivation of the “mass category” participants reveals that most became involved because their children practice fencing, gradually developing an interest in the sport while accompanying them to training. Some others took up fencing because friends or relatives participated, found the sport “charming,” and started under their guidance and recommendation. From this information, we understand that fencing, with its unique competitive attributes, has attracted some public participation in consumption. However, for the sport to become popular in mass consumption, relying solely on its own influence is insufficient. It requires targeted design for the public who do not highly pursue the “competitive” aspect of fencing, aim for fitness, and have insufficient or no training foundation. To meet the “technical threshold” for participating in fencing, training for this group should differ from professional systematic fencing training, focusing on cultivating interest and enabling quick proficiency as the main teaching objective. This fully utilizes the driving role of the industry’s “cultural capital,” allowing this group to truly experience the “sense of gain” and “satisfaction” brought by fencing. Simultaneously, equipment and gear production for the mass fencing industry should cater to different income groups with personalized offerings. As one of the earliest aristocratic sports in Europe, fencing possesses strong social attributes, i.e., “symbolic capital.” Fully leveraging this characteristic is significant for attracting more mass fencing participants^[6].

3.3. Sports Education and Training Field

Coaches and students are the two main entities in sports education and training. Currently, many universities in China recruit students with fencing expertise. This means athletes participating in fencing can gain admission to better universities through excellent athletic performance and academic scores. However, the current “economic threshold” required for participating in fencing in China remains prohibitive for many families. According to visit surveys, in youth fencing training, the average annual club membership fee ranges from 10,000 to 15,000 RMB, which only covers the cost of youth “group lessons.” The fee for a private lesson is typically no less than 500-1000 RMB per session. If a youth only participates in provincial competitions and training, the annual cost is about 40,000-50,000 RMB. Participating in national competitions and training requires annual training costs exceeding 100,000 RMB. Despite such a vast market, China still faces a shortage of excellent fencing coaches, a dilemma caused by the sport’s high “technical threshold.” This necessitates discovering and cultivating practitioners with a certain fencing foundation to integrate into the education and training system, such as retired athletes, high-level referees, and high-level athletes. Training and assessing these specific groups can serve as a talent reserve for future coaches.

3.4. Sports Manufacturing and Technology Field

Currently, some domestic manufacturers in China can produce equipment that meets the safety and technical requirements of the International Fencing Federation (FIE). However, domestic equipment generally still lags behind imported equipment in product details and actual user experience. Imported fencing uniforms are superior to domestic brands in terms of material breathability and sweat absorption, cutting craftsmanship, pattern design, and overall weight. But domestic brands have price advantages, making them more suitable for children in growth phases who need transitional equipment. Secondly, for fencing consumables like blades and lamés (metallic vests), domestic manufacturers also have a gap compared to foreign manufacturers. Through interviews with fencers, it was learned that most higher-level athletes prefer using imported blades and lamés in competitions and training. They believe that although domestic blades meet competition standards, they find the quality of imported blades and lamés more reliable in important competitions and daily training. This indicates that the reliability of domestic fencing consumables still needs improvement, requiring more stable and high-quality products to gradually enhance consumer trust in domestic brands. Finally, regarding the choice of fencing bags and training shoes, fencers generally view these as symbols of their individuality. Imported fencing bags and training shoes are considered more “design-oriented” in color matching and styles compared to domestic brands. Due to

its unique scoring system, all fencing weapons now fully utilize electronic scoring. However, in refereeing, “Hawk-Eye technology” (or video replay) is not yet widespread in most provincial leagues. Matches often require assistant referees to record separately using mobile phones, cameras, etc., for review in case of athlete appeals. This is because the cost and rental fees of high-speed cameras are high, making them unaffordable for some lower-level competitions. Therefore, training instruments, judging instruments, and detection instruments related to fencing are also indispensable for the development of the fencing sports industry.

4. Exploration of Integrated Development for the Fencing Industry Fields

4.1. Leading with the Professional Competitive Field to Activate the Mass Consumption and Education/Training Fields

Utilize the social attention of professional events like the National Fencing Championships to add derivative events such as “Mass Experience Competitions” and “Parent-Child Challenge Matches.” Transform the “symbolic capital” of professional competition (elite athlete demonstration effect) into the “cultural capital” of the mass consumption field to attract family participation, increasing the radiation reach/participant base and promotional channels for sports participation. Simultaneously, establish a talent transfer mechanism from the professional competitive field to the education and training field. Integrate retired athletes into the coach training system, offering specialized training and assessment classes for them, reducing coach training costs while enhancing the professionalism of mass training.

4.2. Utilizing the Mass Consumption Field to Feedback into the Professional Competitive and Product Manufacturing/Technology Fields

Address the practical needs within the mass consumption field for fencing equipment with “design sense,” “lightweight,” and “high cost-effectiveness.” Promote in-depth research and development by domestic manufacturers. Enhance product trust through cooperation with national and provincial teams, trial use by professional athletes, and endorsements by star athletes. Leverage the social attributes of fencing clubs (e.g., parent groups, official accounts, WeChat moments) to expand the project’s influence by compiling competition highlights, producing short videos, and other easily shareable promotional materials. This indirectly increases attention to professional events and sponsor investment.

4.3. Using the Education and Training Field as a Link to Connect the Professional Competitive and Manufacturing/Technology Fields

Promote cooperation between primary and secondary schools, clubs, and management centers. Through the “integration of sports and education” model, share venues and coaching resources to reduce youth training costs, expand the population base, and reserve talent for the professional competitive field. Encourage domestic technology companies to develop personalized fencing equipment and low-cost training aids suitable for different age groups (e.g., smart targets, practice suits that display hit locations in real-time). Cascade/transfer the technical standards required at different stages of the professional competitive field down to education and training scenarios to improve teaching quality.

4.4. Building on the Manufacturing and Technology Field as a Foundation to Support the Upgrade of the Entire Industry Chain

Provide market verification opportunities for domestic brands through official procurement of competition equipment and mandating domestic content rates (e.g., requiring at least 50% of equipment to be domestic brands in commercially sponsored competitions or club leagues named by a fencing brand), allowing them to accumulate technical capital. Establish joint laboratories involving domestic universities, professional clubs, and manufacturing enterprises. Focus on R&D for key materials (e.g., blade durability, lightweight fencing uniforms) and refereeing technology (low-cost Hawk-Eye systems) to enhance the international competitiveness of domestic equipment.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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