UNWANTED BOYS: MEDIA FOOTBALL, DIGITAL AUDIENCES, AND NEW PATHWAYS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This article examines Unwanted Boys, an Uzbek media-football team associated with football content creator Islom Abdujabbarov. Using qualitative analysis of public interviews, news reports, and the project's online materials, the study explores how sporting competition, digital content, public identity, and a reported youth academy are connected. The available sources present media football as a pathway that combines playing opportunities with online visibility and entertainment. Reports also document the team's participation in media-football events, including the 2025 iTV Media Football Cup. However, the evidence does not establish the project's financial sustainability or the academy's educational outcomes. The article therefore distinguishes documented public information from promotional claims and identifies questions for further research.
Keywords: media football, Unwanted Boys, Uzbekistan, digital media, athlete branding, football culture, youth academy

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada Islom Abdujabborov bilan bog‘liq O‘zbekistonning media-futbol jamoasi - Unwanted Boys faoliyati tahlil qilinadi. Ochiq intervyular, ommaviy axborot vositalaridagi maqolalar va jamoaning internetdagi materiallarini sifat jihatidan o‘rganish orqali sport musobaqalari, raqamli kontent, jamoaning ommaviy qiyofasi hamda yoshlar akademiyasi o‘rtasidagi bog‘liqlik ko‘rib chiqiladi. Mavjud manbalarda media-futbol futbol o‘ynash imkoniyatlarini internetdagi ko‘rinish va ko‘ngilochar kontent bilan birlashtiruvchi yo‘nalish sifatida namoyon bo‘ladi. Shuningdek, jamoaning media-futbol musobaqalaridagi ishtiroki haqida ma’lumotlar mavjud. Biroq ochiq manbalar loyihaning moliyaviy barqarorligi yoki akademiyaning ta’limiy natijalarini tasdiqlash uchun yetarli emas. Shu sababli maqolada tasdiqlangan ma’lumotlar reklama mazmunidagi da’volardan ajratilib, kelgusidagi tadqiqot yo‘nalishlari ko‘rsatiladi.
Kalit so‘zlar: media-futbol, Unwanted Boys, O‘zbekiston, raqamli media, sportchi brendi, futbol madaniyati, yoshlar akademiyasi

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается узбекская медиафутбольная команда Unwanted Boys, связанная с футбольным создателем контента Исломом Абдужабборовым. На основе качественного анализа открытых интервью, публикаций СМИ и интернет-материалов проекта изучается взаимосвязь спортивных соревнований,

цифрового контента, публичного образа команды и заявленного направления подготовки юных футболистов. Доступные источники представляют медиафутбол как формат, объединяющий возможность играть в футбол с цифровой видимостью и развлекательным контентом. В публикациях также освещается участие команды в медиафутбольных соревнованиях, включая iTV Media Football Cup 2025 года. Вместе с тем открытые материалы не позволяют подтвердить финансовую устойчивость проекта или образовательные результаты академии. Поэтому в статье разграничиваются документированные сведения и рекламные заявления, а также обозначаются вопросы для дальнейшего исследования.

Ключевые слова: медиафутбол, Unwanted Boys, Узбекистан, цифровые медиа, бренд спортсмена, футбольная культура, футбольная академия

INTRODUCTION

Football is now experienced not only through matches and results but also through online videos, interviews, social-media posts, behind-the-scenes material, and the public personalities of players. Digital platforms allow teams to communicate directly with audiences and to make football-related stories available beyond the stadium. Research on digital football culture argues that football should be studied in relation to the changing digital environments in which fans, players, and organizations interact [1].

Unwanted Boys is a relevant case for examining these developments in Uzbekistan. An interview published by Afisha.uz in June 2024 discusses the team's formation, the meaning of media football, and differences between media football and the conventional professional game [2]. A later interview with founder Islom Abdujabbarov describes the project as bringing together players whose conventional professional careers had not developed as they had hoped, while giving them another opportunity to play before large audiences and build a public profile [3].

The case matters because Unwanted Boys is presented as more than a football squad. Its public activity connects matches, content creation, player visibility, and a reported move into youth training. This article asks three questions: (1) How do public sources describe the identity and development of Unwanted Boys? (2) How are football competition and digital content connected in the project's public presentation? (3) What can currently be said - and what remains unverified - about the academy and its possible contribution to youth football?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Research on sport and media describes a relationship in which sport generates stories and personalities for media, while media channels shape how sporting activities are presented and followed. Fazenda, Pimenta, and Costa's narrative review emphasizes that media influence in sport is complex; visibility should not automatically be treated as evidence of improved performance or other direct outcomes [4]. This distinction is important when analysing a team whose public identity is closely connected to online content.

Digital football studies provide a broader framework for examining the way platforms, online communities, and digital practices become part of football culture [1]. Athlete-branding research offers a related perspective. Doyle, Su, and Kunkel analysed Instagram posts by Major League Soccer players and found that audience engagement varied according to content type

[5]. Their findings cannot be directly transferred to Uzbekistan's media-football scene, but they support the idea that content and engagement can be examined systematically rather than assumed. A systematic review by Martins and colleagues also considers technologies designed to increase fan interaction around football events [6].

The study uses a qualitative case-study approach and document analysis. The source material includes a published Afisha.uz interview with Unwanted Boys [2], a founder interview published by The Mag Business [3], a report on the team's participation in the 2025 iTV Media Football Cup [7], a report by Uz24 [8], and public information published on the team's website [9]. These materials are considered alongside academic literature on sport, media, digital football culture, and athlete branding.

The material was reviewed thematically, focusing on team identity and reported origins, the relationship between sport and content production, publicly reported sporting activity, and the academy. The study does not include a completed interview with the founder, players, coaches, parents, or academy participants. Media interviews and official project materials may reflect selective or promotional perspectives. The analysis therefore describes what public sources report and does not claim to measure causal impact, financial performance, or educational outcomes.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Identity and reported origins

Public accounts connect Unwanted Boys with Islom Abdujabbarov's experience in football and his later work as a football content creator. In the founder interview, he explains that he had played in Uzbekistan's First League but saw limited prospects in that pathway and later began creating football-related content online [3]. The same interview explains the team's name through the idea of players who were not selected or retained by the conventional professional system but still wanted to play football in front of large audiences [3]. This is the founder's public explanation of the team's identity; it should not be assumed that every player shares an identical career history.

The exact founding date requires caution. The team's website presents a timeline beginning in 2021 [9], whereas an Uz24 article describes the team as founded in April 2023 [8]. The sources reviewed for this article do not resolve this discrepancy. Rather than selecting one date without further evidence, the article records the inconsistency as a limitation and recommends verification through dated team announcements or direct confirmation.

Media football as sport and digital content

The Afisha.uz interview treats media football as a format with its own features and asks how it differs from conventional football, including whether it can provide a livelihood for participants [2]. The founder's interview emphasizes openness, personal content, and the visibility of activities that may remain outside the public view in conventional sport [3]. Taken together, these accounts suggest that Unwanted Boys presents football and media production as connected activities: matches provide sporting competition, while videos and social-media content help communicate the team's identity and maintain contact with viewers.

This combined model expands the public role of a football team. Its activity may include training, matches, interviews, challenges, promotional videos, and content about players' lives.

Nevertheless, online visibility does not by itself demonstrate commercial success. A reliable assessment of sustainability would require evidence about sponsorships, advertising revenue, production costs, ticket sales, salaries, and the distribution of income. Such information was not established by the public materials reviewed here.

Sporting activity and public recognition

The available reporting indicates that competition remains an important part of the project. Afisha.uz reported that Unwanted Boys defeated Uzbekistan Football Legends 3-2 in the final of the iTV Media Football Cup in August 2025 and described individual awards presented at the event [7]. This is evidence of a reported tournament result and public sporting recognition, although one tournament cannot establish the team's overall competitive level or long-term performance. A more complete sporting analysis would require a verified match record, including dates, opponents, results, tournament formats, and player participation.

The team's participation in media-football events also shows why it should not be analysed as a social-media channel alone. Competition, training, team selection, and results remain central to the public story. The distinctive feature is the way these sporting activities are presented alongside digital content and public personalities.

Digital visibility and audience engagement

The sources portray digital communication as a major part of the team's public presence. However, subscriber counts, view totals, and engagement rates change over time and should be recorded with a date and a clearly identified platform. This article does not treat undated or historical audience figures as current statistics. Nor does it infer audience growth from the existence of online content.

The academic literature suggests practical questions for future study. For example, a researcher could compare views, likes, comments, and shares across match highlights, player interviews, challenges, and training videos over a fixed period. This would help identify which formats attract different forms of audience response. Research on athlete branding suggests that content type may matter for engagement [5], but a dedicated analysis of Unwanted Boys' own posts would be needed to determine whether similar patterns occur in this context.

The academy and youth-football pathway

Public materials describe an academy as a newer extension of the Unwanted Boys project [9]. This development potentially connects football training with a media-oriented environment. It may provide a useful case for asking how youth football organizations present themselves to families and whether digital content is used only for promotion or is also integrated into learning. At present, these are research questions, not demonstrated outcomes.

The public materials reviewed do not establish the academy's current enrolment, participants' progress, coaching qualifications, safeguarding arrangements, fees, or longer-term outcomes. The existence of an academy alone cannot prove improved technical ability, progression to professional clubs, or wider social impact. Those claims would require evidence such as a published curriculum, reliable participant data, interviews with coaches and parents, and longitudinal information about players' development. Until such evidence is available, the

academy should be discussed as a reported initiative rather than as a proven youth-development success.

Overall interpretation

The evidence supports understanding Unwanted Boys as a hybrid project combining football competition, digital content, a recognizable public identity, and a reported youth-training initiative. This interpretation connects the case with research on digital football culture, sport-media relations, athlete branding, and fan interaction [1, 4-6]. The key analytical distinction is between visibility and impact: public attention may make a team prominent, but it does not independently establish financial sustainability, player welfare, or the educational value of its academy.

The case also points to a possible alternative route for players who do not establish careers in conventional professional football. According to the founder's account, media football offers another setting for playing, recognition, and content-related work [3]. Further research should investigate how players themselves experience this route and whether it offers sustainable professional opportunities. The current source base is useful for documenting the project's public presentation, but first-hand research would be needed to understand participants' experiences.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Unwanted Boys through publicly available sources and academic research on football, media, digital culture, and athlete branding. The case illustrates how a football project can combine sporting activity with online content and a recognizable public identity. Reporting on the 2025 iTV Media Football Cup documents a notable competitive result, while public materials describe an academy as a further development of the project [7, 9].

The findings should be interpreted cautiously. Public sources do not resolve the discrepancy in the reported founding date, establish the project's financial sustainability, or demonstrate the academy's educational outcomes. Future research should verify the historical timeline, collect dated data from official digital platforms, compile match records, and seek evidence from players, coaches, parents, and academy participants. A direct interview with the founder would add value, but the project can still be studied through public sources if the limits of those sources are made explicit. Unwanted Boys therefore offers a useful case for further research into the changing relationship between football, digital media, and youth training in Uzbekistan.

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