

Research Report on NBA Consumer Insights and Current Marketing Practices in China

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Abstract

By analyzing consumer survey data on the NBA in the Chinese market, this report provides a relatively comprehensive evaluation of the NBA's major marketing strategies in China. A total of 126 valid questionnaires were collected. Most respondents live in China's first-tier cities, are mainly aged 18 to 25, accounting for 65%, and the male-to-female ratio is approximately 8:2. The survey shows that, through its digital media operation matrix, deep localization efforts, and firm commitment to operations centered on star-player IP, the NBA has built strong brand loyalty in China, mainly among young male fans. Among respondents, 88.5% use Tencent Sports as their primary viewing platform, approximately 91% of active fans made NBA-related purchases in the past year, and 95% of respondents attributed their interest in the NBA to specific star players rather than teams. Meanwhile, this report also reveals persistent weaknesses such as serious homogenization of derivative products and the inconvenience caused by time differences in game viewing, and provides corresponding recommendations through a SWOT analysis framework.

Keywords

NBA; China Market Marketing; Sports Brand; Consumer Behavior; Digital Media; Star-Player IP; Localization Strategy.

1. Introduction and Research Methodology

As one of the most successful international sports IPs to enter the Chinese market, the NBA has become an industry benchmark in marketing strategy. To gain a more accurate understanding of the effectiveness of its strategies and authentic consumer feedback, this study combines qualitative analysis, based on research papers concerning the NBA's official strategies, with quantitative analysis, based on an online questionnaire survey. It aims to analyze the current state of the NBA's marketing in China from both macro-level strategy and micro-level user behavior perspectives.

A total of 126 valid questionnaires were collected in this survey. Respondents mainly live in China's first-tier cities, accounting for 88%. They are mainly aged 18 to 25, accounting for 65.1%, and the male-to-female ratio is approximately 8:2. In terms of years of following the NBA, 27% have followed the NBA for less than three years, 37.3% for three to ten years, and 35.7% for more than ten years.

2. NBA Consumer Behavior and Marketing Strategies in China

2.1. Consumer Choices of Viewing Platforms and Media Content

In terms of the most important channels for watching games, 88.5% of respondents chose Tencent Sports as their primary viewing platform, demonstrating the strategic value of Tencent as the NBA's official rights partner in China. Migu Sports ranked second, with 25.8%. In addition

to official live-streaming platforms, 72.3% of fans obtain game highlights, news, and related content through short-video platforms such as Douyin and WeChat Channels, far exceeding traditional news portals at 13.5% and vertical communities such as Hupu at 18.4% [1]. This confirms the trend toward fragmented content consumption [2]. Among the content published on these non-game promotional platforms, personal highlight compilations or documentaries about star players are the most popular, at 81.2%, while original talk shows are relatively less popular, at 28.8%.

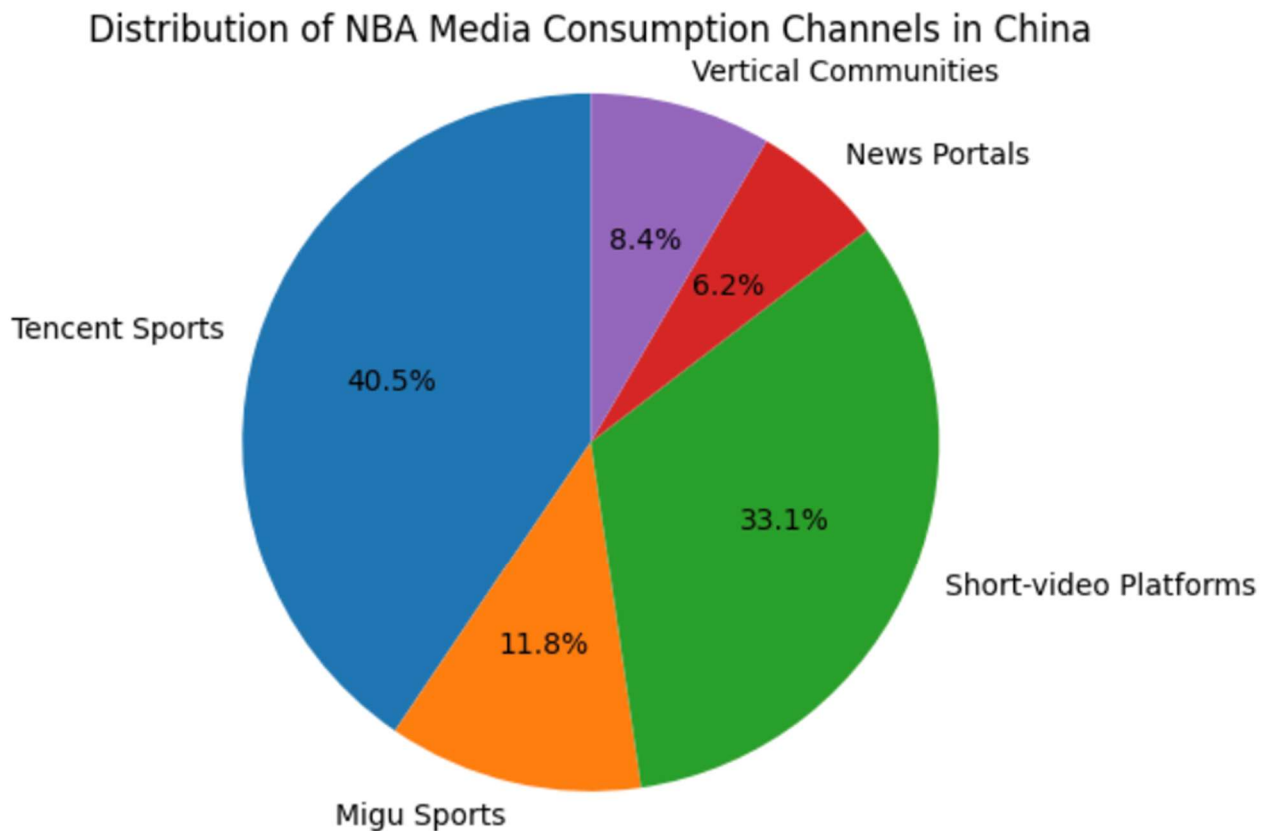


Figure 1. Viewing Platform Choices among NBA Audiences in China

2.2. Merchandise Consumption and Consumer Satisfaction

The questionnaire used in this paper shows that approximately 91% of surveyed fans made NBA-related derivative purchases in the past year [3, 4]. Among them, fans who purchased jerseys or peripheral apparel related to their favorite team or star player accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 68.4%. Next, approximately 39.1% of fans purchased signature shoes of star players. Officially licensed NBA games such as NBA2K accounted for a relatively small proportion, only 9.2%. When asked why they purchased NBA derivative products, 75.4% of respondents stated that their purpose was to “support their favorite star player,” followed by “daily wear needs,” which was selected by 52.4%. In addition, approximately 35% of respondents stated that they purchased such products for their “collectible value.”

However, in terms of consumer satisfaction, recent years of insufficient creativity and the NBA’s slow pace in launching fresh products are directly reflected in the data. Satisfaction with the design quality of licensed products was only 42%, while nearly 49% of consumers believed that the NBA’s current derivative products are seriously homogenized and lack innovation.

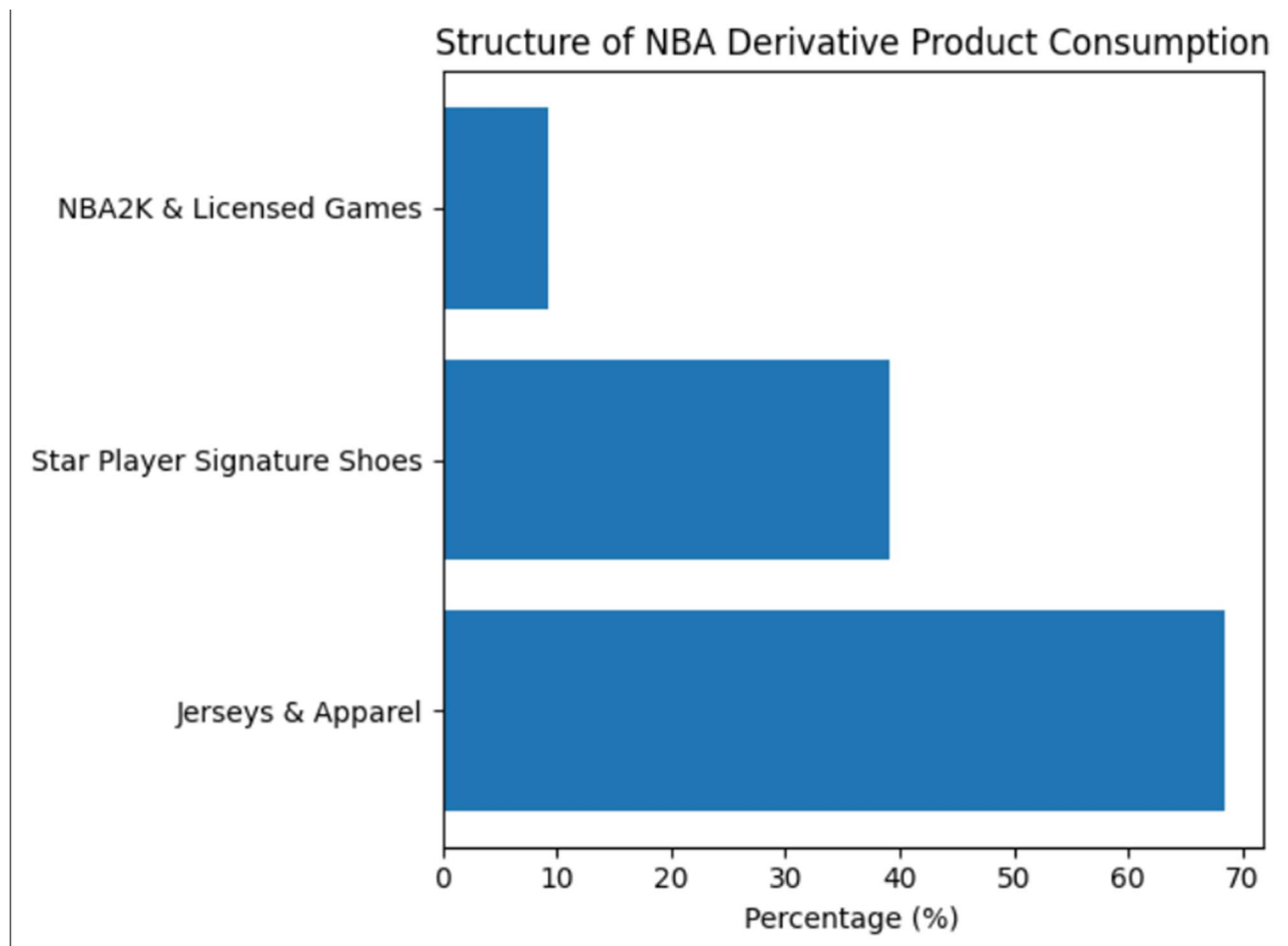


Figure 2. Distribution of Derivative Product Consumption among NBA Audiences in China

2.3. Influence of Star Players and Events

The survey data shows that the star-player effect and the influence brought by top star-player IP remain the most important components of the NBA's success in China. Approximately 95% of respondents believe that specific star players are the main reason they follow the NBA. When a favorite star player transfers to another team, nearly 70% of fans said they would "shift their attention to the player's new team." This undoubtedly demonstrates the difference in appeal between NBA star players and teams, which also distinguishes the NBA from other mainstream sports, especially football.

Regarding China tours, which directly connect NBA star players with Chinese fans, and local players, nearly 90% of respondents were aware of China tours by the star players they follow, but fewer than 15% had actually participated. This phenomenon is closely related to factors such as geographic distance and cost. Nevertheless, nearly 82% of respondents said they would be willing to watch the China tour of a star player they follow. For example, Stephen Curry's China tour in the summer of 2025 attracted extensive online attention and public discussion, making it a powerful promotional method for the NBA [5]. In addition, the bridging role played by Chinese local players, Chinese-heritage players, and even Asian players entering the NBA is considered extremely important. Approximately 79% of respondents said they would pay more attention to teams featuring Yao Ming, Yi Jianlian, or Chinese-heritage player Jeremy Lin. In light of the recent entry of Cui Yongxi and Yang Hansen into the NBA, nearly 90% of respondents said they would be willing to set aside time to watch these players' games.

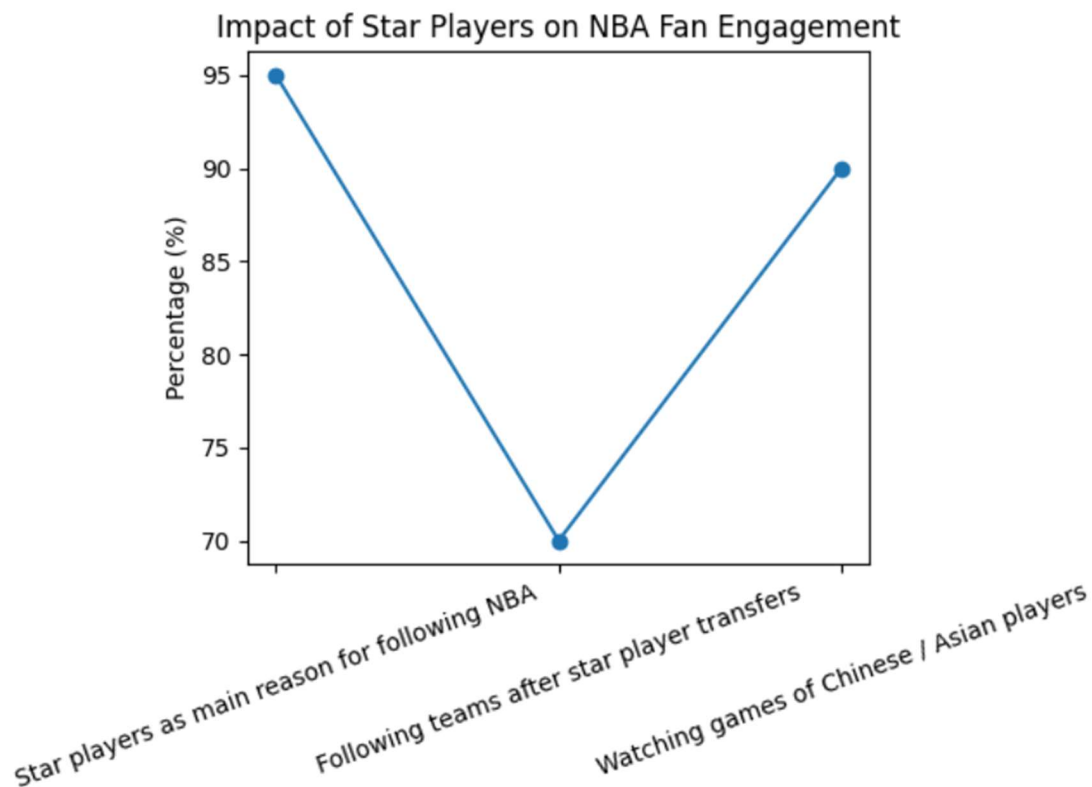


Figure 3. Impact of the Star-Player Effect on Audience Engagement

2.4. Brand Localization

In recent years, localized content and derivative products launched by the NBA, such as Spring Festival-themed products and New Year greeting videos from players, have received positive evaluations from as many as 86.7% of respondents [6, 7]. However, the NBA's choices in cross-industry collaborations have long been controversial, and evaluations of their effectiveness are highly polarized. Regarding cross-industry collaborations with entertainment celebrities such as Cai Xukun, approximately 45% of respondents believed that such collaborations help the NBA break beyond its existing fan base and attract more viewers, while the remaining respondents believed that such collaborations are “too weakly connected to sports content” or “damaging to the brand image.”

3. SWOT Analysis of the NBA's Current Marketing in China

The survey finds that the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the NBA's current marketing in China are mainly reflected as follows:

Strengths (S): S1: Digital channel penetration is extremely high, proving the effectiveness of the digital media operation matrix. S2: Supported by the data, fan consumption driven by the personal appeal of star players is highly effective.

Weaknesses (W): W1: 79.6% of fans believe that “game times fall in the morning/on workdays” is the greatest obstacle affecting their ability to watch full games. W2: The lack of innovation in derivative products is confirmed by the data, indicating the need to introduce new ideas and products.

Opportunities (O): O1: Generation Z consumers, aged 18 to 25, have strong demand for trendiness and experiential consumption, which aligns with the NBA's direction. More player edition (PE) gear may be launched in the future. O2: Strong willingness to participate online in activities such as star-player China tours provides direction for innovative interactive models.

Threats (T): T1: The development of the domestic sports environment has intensified competition. Among respondents, 41.5% said their attention to the CBA had increased over the past year [8].

4. Conclusion

The NBA has successfully built a mature business system in China with digital media as its platform, star-player IP as its core, and localization strategy as its foundation. The questionnaire data used in this study fully verifies the effectiveness of its marketing strategies, while also pointing out shortcomings in the depth of fan experience, namely the inconvenience caused by time differences in watching games and excessive homogenization in derivative product innovation. Facing an increasingly competitive domestic sports market and increasingly diversified consumer expectations, the key to the NBA's continued growth in China lies in breaking through existing models and deepening its connection with fan communities through more personalized and experience-oriented approaches.

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