

Globalization Layout Strategies of the Sports Entities Industry: The Study of Sports Ips Entering the Chinese Market through Social Media

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Abstract:

With the continuous development of online social media, China's massive user base and digitalization progress have become significant advantages, attracting international sports organizations and celebrities to target the Chinese market as a frontier for global expansion. This potential is underscored by a digital sports audience exceeding 780 million (73% of total internet users) and platforms like Douyin generating over 12 billion daily sports content views, creating an unparalleled ecosystem for fan engagement. Furthermore, the commercial imperative is evident in cases like the NBA, which derives over 1.5 billion dollars annually from China—12% of its global revenue—primarily through social media-driven merchandise and media rights. This essay discusses how major sports IPs, such as leagues, clubs, and athlete brands, can leverage Chinese social media to expand their market and increase fan engagement. The study uses a mixed research method, combining quantitative research on social media indicators, such as fan numbers and engagement rates, with case studies of sports IPs such as the NBA and Manchester United to identify the current market situation and key challenges, and to make recommendations. the analysis of successful cases such as the NBA and Manchester United shows that overcoming these obstacles requires a transformation into a “trend leader” and the cultivation of a participatory fan ecosystem.

Keywords: Sport Marketing, Sport Management, Social Media, Globalization, Sport

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Theme

In addition to grassroots sports participating in the market, globalization has almost impacted all sports markets [1]. From sports events and television broadcasting markets to sports sponsorship and sports equipment markets, the depth and importance of globalization are growing. Against this backdrop, China is undoubtedly a market with enormous potential and complexity. In 2023, the total output of China's sports industry was 3.6741 trillion yuan, with an added value of 1.4915 trillion yuan [2]. Its large population, rapidly growing per capita income, government support for sports, and developed digital social ecosystem are all unique advantages. The global expansion of international sports entities is essentially driven by capital logic and cultural export [3]. With a population of 1.4 billion and a unique digital ecosystem, the Chinese market has become a battleground for the commercialization of sports IP. For sports IP, establishing a meaningful presence in China is no longer an option but a strategic necessity for achieving global growth, expanding fan bases, and diversifying revenue streams (merchandise sales, broadcast rights, and sponsorship). Top sporting events such as the UEFA Champions League and the NBA have transcended the realm of competition and evolved into "mobile symbols" that carry cultural identity [4]. This study will explore the strategies, challenges, and successful cases of international sports entities leveraging Chinese social media as a primary channel for market expansion.

1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to systematically organize and analyze the current status and strategies of sports IP on major social media platforms in China, while identifying the main challenges hindering the entry of international sports IP into the Chinese market, including culture, operations, and audience content preferences. Finally, based on empirical research and successful case studies, this study proposes practical recommendations for international sports IP to enter the Chinese market through social media.

This study combines theoretical and practical knowledge. Theoretically, by exploring how the international sports industry breaks conventional norms in the context of cultural differences and rapidly changing digital environments, this study contributes to the fields of sports globalization and digital media communication. Practically, this study would provide sports industry marketers and managers with data-driven analysis of Chinese social media, enabling them to effectively recognize challenges and

avoid pitfalls, and thereby design marketing strategies that resonate culturally.

1.3 Research Methodology and Structure

This study uses a mixed research method that includes quantitative and qualitative research. In the quantitative analysis, this study collects and analyzes major sports IPs, such as the NBA, Premier League clubs, and top athlete accounts, and provides data on fan growth and interaction rates (likes, comments, shares, video views, etc.) on key platforms such as Weibo and TikTok to provide background and current status of Chinese social media usage and sports fan culture. In the qualitative research, the study analyzed the content strategy, post types, and audience of selected IP accounts to help evaluate cultural adaptability and determine operational strategies. In addition, case study analysis combined these two methods to conduct an in-depth analysis of specific sports IPs to understand strategy implementation, challenges faced, and results achieved.

This paper consists of five sections. The second section introduces some concepts related to the sports industry and marketing, as well as the Chinese social media environment. The third section analyzes the current status and common strategies of international sports IP on Chinese social media platforms. The fourth section delves into the main challenges faced. The fifth section provides a detailed analysis through case studies of Manchester United and the NBA. The sixth section offers some strategic recommendations. Finally, the paper summarizes the research findings and points out the limitations of this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Sports Entities

Sports entities are the mainstay and cornerstone of the global sports industry's commercial and cultural strength. Sports products encompass multiple levels and tiers, such as the competitions/events themselves and their rules and regulations, as well as related competition activities, fan motivations, and services and environments surrounding the events [5]. Entities are closely tied to these products—global or continental league and event organizations that commercialize top-tier events with international influence and participation, such as FIFA organizing the World Cup, UEFA organizing the Champions League, and the National Basketball Association (NBA). These organizations control valuable broadcast rights, sponsorship resources, and licensing rights; Top clubs often have a global fan base that transcends their local origins. Examples include

Manchester United, FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, the New York Yankees, and the Los Angeles Lakers. Their brand value stems from sports achievements, historical heritage, star players, and community identity; Athlete brands build global superstars through athletic prowess, personal charm, and market appeal. Cristiano Ronaldo, LeBron James, and Lionel Messi are prime examples, having become powerful marketing entities independent of their clubs and leagues, though they remain closely tied to them; Although sports apparel brands sometimes operate independently, brands like Nike, Adidas, and Puma deeply integrate into the sports ecosystem through sponsorship, endorsements, and merchandise sales, often serving as global amplifiers for leagues, clubs, and athletes.

2.2 The Chinese Social Media Landscape

China boasts a vast and diverse digital ecosystem framework, dominated by platforms such as Weibo, Douyin (TikTok), and Bilibili. In terms of scale, as of June 2024, the number of monthly active users of short videos reached 989 million, while the number of monthly active users of mobile internet reached 1.235 billion, representing a year-on-year increase of 1.8% [6]. In terms of diversity, China does not have a single dominant platform like Facebook, but rather multiple platforms catering to specific needs. Weibo focuses on news dissemination, public discussion, celebrity/fan interaction, and official announcements, similar to Twitter/X + Facebook News Feed. As of September 2024, Weibo had 587 million monthly active users and 257 million daily active users [7]. Douyin focuses on short-form video entertainment, trends, challenges, influencer marketing (KOL/KOC), and live streaming, and is extremely popular. Bilibili is dedicated to youth culture, animation, and gaming, and is increasingly focusing on sports, particularly esports and niche sports, known for its interactive “danmu” comments.

3. International Sports Entities’ Promotion in China via Social Media

3.1 Current Status of Promotion

As of June 2025, some international sports organizations have achieved significant results on Chinese social media platforms. As one of the first entities to operate on Chinese social media, the NBA now leads the pack, posting about 50 posts per day on Weibo, gaining 43.19 million followers, and accumulating 140 million reposts, comments, and likes. On the Douyin platform, total interactions have even exceeded 1 billion, with cumulative video views surpassing 17.9 billion (Data from: Weibo and Douyin). Ad-

ditionally, Manchester United has 11.33 million followers, while Real Madrid and Liverpool each have millions of followers on Weibo. Top athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi also have nearly 10 million followers. However, some entities have relatively poor performance on Chinese social media. For example, while the MLB has 6.55 million followers, it posts fewer than ten times daily on Weibo, with interaction data also appearing somewhat lackluster.

3.2 Current Strategies

International sports entities actively deploy platform-specialized operational frameworks in China. Entities like the Premier League and UEFA designate WeChat Official Accounts and Weibo as tier-1 channels for time-sensitive announcements (e.g., Manchester United publishes transfer confirmations on Weibo within 15 minutes of club statements). This ensures authoritative information penetrates core fan bases. On Douyin, The NBA produces *3-9 second micro-highlights* (e.g., dunks with frame-by-frame zoom) synced to trending audio, while Paris Saint-Germain edits goal celebrations into meme templates for user replication. On RedNote, Athlete brands (e.g., Rafael Nadal) curate behind-the-scenes lifestyle content, such as Shanghai culinary vlogs, to amplify relatability. On Bilibili: LaLiga hosts tactical explainers using animated bullet comments where fans debate strategies in real-time. In addition, Manchester United’s 14-year Spring Festival tradition includes mandarin-speaking player greetings and qipao-inspired jersey launches. Building on these foundational strategies, the use of match highlights and clips has become routine. The use of match highlights and clips has become routine, with platforms like Douyin and Weibo videos flooded with short clips of goals, dunks, touchdowns, saves, and key moments, often edited for maximum impact and viral spread. Such content caters to users’ preferences for easily digestible, passionate content. During major Chinese holidays, most entities launch holiday activities. For example, during the Spring Festival, Manchester United launches new Spring Festival products and has players record Spring Festival greetings in advance. This activity has been ongoing for 14 years since 2012. Such initiatives are not only strategies by major companies to reduce cultural barriers but also part of efforts to enhance fan engagement and community building. The NBA frequently leverages events like star players visiting China to foster relationships between players and fans. For example, the visit of hot star Wembanyama to China, where he spent ten days meditating at the Shaolin Temple, sparked widespread discussion. In addition, the strong social and private nature of WeChat can be used

to establish official or semi-official fan communities as a method of community building. Official clubs or official partners, such as the China office, will establish regional or themed WeChat groups, such as “Beijing Manchester United Fan Club.” These groups are managed by official personnel or core volunteers and hold fan football matches or offline group viewing events from time to time.

From the above strategies, it can be seen that most sports entities have adopted a parallel approach of text and visual content. The visual content is already sufficiently developed, but the transition from static content to interactive content is not yet complete [8].

4. Challenges Faced by International Sports Entities

4.1 Cultural Differences

Although many large international sports organizations have established a foothold in the Chinese market, some entities have not performed well, with one of the main reasons being cultural differences and differing market preferences. Many European football clubs or American sports leagues rely on decades or even centuries of historical heritage and local identity to build emotional connections. This “heritage” narrative often fails to resonate deeply with Chinese audiences, as they lack the generational continuity or firsthand experience of local fan culture. If a team or league lacks significant influence or has not achieved widespread popularity, it will face significant challenges in spreading its reach on social media and in the Chinese market. For example, despite its rich history and the launch of its Weibo account in 2016, the English Premier League team Wolverhampton Wanderers has struggled to gain traction in China. This is largely due to its lack of dominance in competitions and its relatively conventional approach to marketing, which has resulted in limited creation of viral content. Additionally, some sports have extremely low participation rates in China, such as baseball, American football, rugby, and even ice hockey. These sports have minimal grassroots infrastructure and public awareness in China. Promoting them requires extensive educational efforts to explain rules, tactics, and appeal, which is highly challenging in the fast-paced, entertainment-driven social media environment. The disconnect between watching and participating makes it difficult to build deeper connections.

4.2 Platform Strategy and Content Preferences

Developing different communication strategies across various platforms and accurately assessing audience pref-

erences also pose significant challenges for operations. A common misconception is treating platforms in a one-dimensional, formulaic manner—for example, viewing Weibo as solely for official press releases and Douyin as exclusively for competition highlights. This approach fails to leverage the full potential of each platform. For instance, using Douyin solely to post highlight clips overlooks its strengths in challenge campaigns, trend dissemination, and influencer collaborations. The market is now in an era of interactive content, with live streaming and content storytelling thriving in China. Failing to consider such communication strategies will result in poor outcomes [8]. Additionally, the industry often allocates resources to content that fails to resonate with audiences, such as lengthy player interviews or translated press conference content. While these may be effective information sources for existing fans, they often have lower completion rates and engagement compared to concise, impactful content. Alternatively, overly formal or “corporate” communication styles may clash with the preferred style of Chinese users and successful local brands, which is why communication companies are now actively recruiting younger talent.

4.3 Operational Model Challenges

The current mainstream model is to outsource social media operations and content creation to local Chinese agencies. For example, Mailman, which represents Manchester United and the UEFA Champions League, and Shankai Sports, which represents UEFA, are good examples. Although these teams are already very mature, less experienced teams may encounter some issues. Outsourced teams may lack a genuine understanding of passion for sports projects or clubs, leading to content that fails to resonate with fans, or errors in player names, tactics, or history that can damage brand credibility. Additionally, the typical outsourcing model involves the agency creating content, which is then submitted to an international headquarters for review, often across different time zones, resulting in missed real-time trends and friction between teams.

5. Success Case Studies

5.1 NBA: Turn event operations into Trend Generator

In terms of core metrics, the NBA is the undisputed leader in international sports leagues in China. Its Weibo account (NBA) has over 43 million followers. Its Douyin account is even more impressive, with reported annual engagement (likes, comments, shares) exceeding 1 billion in 2023, and

cumulative video views reaching 17.9 billion. The NBA's operations have completely moved away from formulaic, platform-specific strategies and are highly skilled at creating viral content. They have fully leveraged Weibo's features, filling the interface with original content and interactive elements like polls, while incorporating more text and Chinese cultural elements into Douyin's short video captions and covers. For example, regarding Desmond Bane's trade, they combined Bane's posts and official screenshots to create an original notebook-style image and launched a discussion topic among basketball fans titled "Has the first-round draft pick inflation started?" This attracted significant attention from basketball enthusiasts. Additionally, their current top video on Douyin features Haliburton's game-winning shot, with passionate text in the caption to stir viewers' emotions, and paired it with the Chinese idiom "see blood and seal the deal" on the cover. This combination has become their signature style, and the video received 337,000 likes. NBA's Weibo is no longer as text-heavy as before, and Douyin is no longer just a compilation of highlights. Original content, Chinese-style expression, and the ability to capitalize on trends have made them a "Trend Generator."

5.2 Manchester United: Building Community in a Competitive Landscape

As one of the most popular international football clubs in China, Manchester United has more than 11.33 million followers on Weibo, and also dominates the sports community on Douyin and Red Note. Like NBA operators, Manchester United's management places a strong emphasis on original content. They maintain a strong presence on the Douyin platform, frequently attracting users through key moment highlights and player-focused specials. For example, users often see special edits celebrating legendary players' birthdays and "On This Day" retrospectives, effectively leveraging the club's rich history to introduce new fans to its legacy and allow longtime fans to relive their memories. Additionally, their community building relies on years of continuous interaction with fans. On Weibo, the official account has launched a variety of fan engagement activities, such as #ManUnitedTour, #ManUnitedTalkLounge, and #StrongestChineseRedDevilsShowdown, which have gained significant popularity. These activities include inviting Manchester United players or coaches to engage in in-depth conversations and storytelling with guests who have a special connection to China, as well as fan competitions where winners can visit Old Trafford for a pilgrimage. Furthermore, after Manchester United female fans wearing team jerseys participated in the Gaokao (college entrance exam) and

were interviewed by media, the club's operations team searched online to find and gift autographed items from players to the fans, which garnered widespread support and praise. These activities and interactions have built a massive Chinese fan community, strengthened fans' sense of belonging, and established a solid foundation for the club in China.

6. Recommendations for Future Development

To overcome the significant cultural barriers between international sports entities and Chinese users, operators must engage in deep cultural localization that goes beyond language. This includes hiring bilingual talent who are well-versed in both sports culture and Chinese internet culture, and establishing a "global creative repository-local reprocessing" mechanism [9], such as hiring sports bloggers or news writers who are deeply familiar with Chinese humor, internet slang, colloquialisms, and local culture. Additionally, stereotypes must be discarded, and it must be recognized that the platform is merely an official channel to reach users, with the content users see entirely dependent on the operator's output strategy. As netizens become increasingly mature and their content appreciation skills improve, only high-quality content that integrates text, images, and interactive elements can effectively capture their attention and spark discussion. Deeper user connections rely on effective fan interaction and community cultivation, which is a two-way, interactive, and meaningful process of building brand-user relationships [10]. This requires moving beyond one-way content dissemination to build a participatory ecosystem that transforms passive audiences into active participants. Operators can cleverly integrate fan interaction into local cultural rhythms (such as New Year's greetings) to create sustained emotional touchpoints, or proactively create interactive opportunities through post-match MVP voting, Q&A sessions, and other activities to stimulate fan engagement.

7. Conclusion

This study explores the current status, challenges, and case analyses of international sports entities entering the Chinese market through social media. The study demonstrates the immense potential of the Chinese market, outlines the current state of sports IP, and outlines strategies for content distribution and localization efforts. However, challenges such as cultural differences, audience content preferences, and operational team challenges remain. Detailed case studies of the NBA and Manchester United illustrate how to achieve successful operations, with their success

highlighting that cultural adaptability, platform-specific content innovation, and authentic community engagement are indispensable pillars for effective market penetration. This study primarily focuses on major leagues and clubs on China's large social media platforms and relies heavily on publicly available data and observable content strategies, making it difficult to delve deeply into internal decision-making processes, budget allocation, and the precise return on investment for specific marketing activities. While the case studies are illustrative, they primarily focus on high-profile successful cases and may not fully reflect the challenges faced by smaller leagues, clubs, or niche sports, nor account for differences in resource allocation. Future research could involve interviewing social media managers of international sports organizations in China to gain deeper operational insights, or conducting comparative analyses of different sports to explore Chinese fans' awareness and preferences regarding these strategies, thereby providing feedback to the target audience in this regard.

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